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OR,
FIVE IN ONE.

A Romance of Boulder Bar.

BY WILLIAM G. PATTEN,
AUTHOR OF "THE DIAMOND SPORT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE RED-BREADED RESCUER.

HOWARD THORNE and Sylva Blair had traveled a long distance in company, therefore they were well acquainted.

Young Thorne was on his way to a youthful mining-camp called Boulder Bar, to join his father, who was a mine-owner in that camp.

Now it happened that Sylva Blair's destination was the same camp, where she expected to

OLD BOMBSHELL QUICKLY UNLOOSED THE MASK, AND WHEN IT WAS STRIPPED AWAY FROM THE OUTLAW'S FACE, THE MEN OF BOWDER BAR UTTERED A CRY OF AMAZE.

meet her father, who, she said, was in business there.

Being thus thrown into each other's company, the young people soon became acquainted and sociable. As luck had it, during the last part of the journey by stage, they had the entire inside of the vehicle to themselves. They chatted and laughed gayly, and long ere they reached the end of the journey, Howard Thorne was willing to acknowledge that he was more than half-bewitched by his companion's bright eyes, sweet voice and low, musical laugh.

Howard Thorne was a college graduate, although not "college-bred" in the sense that the word is applied to many of our modern college graduates. There was no trace of affectation or conceit about him, and Sylva Blair had learned that he could be very pleasant and entertaining. She came to the conclusion that Howard Thorne was a fine young man—in fact, an excellent person to have for a friend.

The coach rattled and rumbled along a mountain-pass, the driver on the box singing snatches of old songs, and occasionally cracking his long whip and shouting to the horses.

In the course of conversation, Howard Thorne asked his companion:

"Was it your desire to come out here into this rough country, Miss Blair, or did your father wish you to come?"

"Oh, it was father's idea," she replied.

"I should hardly think he would wish you to expose yourself to the many dangers with which you will be constantly surrounded. If report speaks true, this is a very wild country, indeed."

"It is strange. Father said that it was perfectly safe out here. He praised the country very highly."

"Strange, indeed," muttered Thorne, looking puzzled. "How long have you been separated from your father, Miss Blair?"

"Oh, we have been together very little since I was twelve years old. He is a business man, and could not spare the time to be with me."

"Your mother is dead?"

"Yes; she died when I was a babe. I do not remember her."

"Pardon my continued inquisitiveness," said Thorne, with a smile. "I suppose you have been with friends during the time that you and your father have been obliged to live apart?"

"No; I have been at school, where all were strangers to me at first."

Thorne was silent for several minutes. The expression on his face showed that he was thinking deeply. Finally he said:

"It does not appear strange to me that your father wishes to again have his daughter with him, after so many years of separation; but it does seem strange that he should wish her to come out into this wild land, and, more than that, to travel alone, with no companion through this country, where there is constant danger from hostile Indians and villainous road-agents."

"Why, sir," exclaimed the girl, in some alarm, "is there such danger?"

"Yes; but we have almost reached the end of our journey, and have not yet been molested. I think there will be no trouble, but should trouble come—"

Spang!

The sharp report of a rifle rung out, and a cry of mortal agony came from the driver of the stage, as he sunk down into the boot, with one hand pressed to his breast and dyed crimson with his life's blood.

Out from behind the rocks, where he had been crouching, sprang a man, who seized the leaders by the bits with an iron grip, and with a sudden wrench set them back on their haunches.

At the same instant a band of dark horsemen dashed around a bend and surrounded the stage. Every man wore a black mask over his face and carried a cocked weapon in his hand.

"Road-agents!" gasped young Thorne, hoarsely, drawing a revolver at the same time.

The girl uttered a faint exclamation of fear, but did not faint.

"Easy, now!" growled a harsh voice, as a masked outlaw peered into the stage. "No foolishness, or—"

Crack!

Howard Thorne fired fairly in the speaker's face, and he plunged headlong from his horse to the ground.

Fierce cries of anger and surprise came from the astonished road-agents. For an instant they hesitated, as though dreading a second shot.

Then one cried:

"Ten thousand curses! Dan is killed! Haul out the infernal bound who fired that shot!"

Several outlaws started to obey; but, at that instant, a wild shout came to their ears, followed

by the clatter of a horse's hoofs, and, looking upward, the startled outlaws saw a strange appearing horseman come dashing recklessly down the precipitous incline.

The horseman's hat was off, and his long dark hair streamed out on the wind, as he came madly downward. He wore a coat of dark cloth, but the vest beneath it was bright scarlet in color. The horse he bestrode was a magnificent black stallion. The dark mustached face of the man was fixed with a look of reckless, devil-may-care daring.

And in his hands, which were freed of the bridle-rein, he held two heavy self-cocking revolvers, with which he opened fire upon the staring road-agents.

He worked his weapons with astonishing rapidity, and, although upon horseback and dashing down a steep and dangerous incline at a terrific pace, every bullet seemed to reach its mark.

The outlaws seemed seized by confusion. At the first shot, one of them uttered a shriek and toppled over, falling from the saddle. Then, as the shots continued in rapid succession, men and horses went down.

A few hasty return shots were fired, but the mad horseman still came on, a reckless laugh bursting from his lips.

Then the outlaws turned and dashed away, as though from an avenging Nemesis.

Released by the hands that held them, the stage-horses, becoming frightened dashed away, dragging the rocking stage behind them.

Sending a few shots and a taunting laugh after the fleeing outlaws, the red-breasted horseman turned his attention to the runaway horses attached to the stage.

After firing the shot that tumbled one of the road-agents from the saddle, Howard Thorne re-cocked his revolver, preparatory to a repetition of the shot.

Then he heard the wild cry and rattling shots.

"Good heavens!"

The cry burst from Thorne's lips as he saw the reckless horseman come dashing madly down the steep incline. With bated breath, the young man watched the red-breast rider, expecting each moment to see the noble horse plunge headlong, hurling both itself and rider down to death.

But, nothing of the kind occurred.

When the outlaw's hands released the frightened horses, they plunged suddenly forward, throwing young Thorne off his feet into the bottom of the coach.

A startled cry came from Sylva Blair's lips.

When Thorne regained his feet, it did not take him long to discover that the horses were unguided and, therefore, running away.

"Oh, sir!" cried Sylva, "what—what has happened?"

"Nothing very alarming, I think," replied Howard, reassuringly. "A friend came to our rescue, and put the outlaws to flight."

"But who is guiding the stage?" she inquired in alarm, as the vehicle careened dangerously to one side. "We shall be killed!"

"Don't be alarmed, Sylva—Miss Blair. The driver may be injured so that he is unable to handle the horses; but I think we shall receive assistance. If not, perhaps I can manage to get out upon the stage."

"Oh, I fear we shall be killed!"

Thorne made no reply, but thrusting his head out of the stage-window, shouted to the driver. Again and again he shouted; still the terrified horses tore madly on and he received no reply from the driver, who was lying dead in the boot, with the reins still gripped by his lifeless fingers.

But from away in the rear came an answering shout.

Looking back, he saw the red-breasted horseman, who had charged down upon and routed the road-agents, in pursuit.

Thorne waved his hand, and the pursuer answered in a similar manner, seeming to urge his flying horse to greater exertions.

Howard Thorne turned to his fair companion, and found that she had sunk back in a corner of the stage and covered her face with her hands.

"Cheer up, little one!" he said, consolingly, attempting to assuage her fears. "Help is coming. We are in no great danger, and I think the horses will soon be stopped."

His words seemed to arouse her. She took her hands away from her face, showing it to be very white, but her voice did not tremble as she spoke:

"I am not so very badly frightened," she said, quite bravely. "I only felt a little excited

for a moment, then came faintness. I shall be all right soon."

"That's good!" exclaimed Thorne, with satisfaction. "I feared you were overcome."

"Not quite. But you spoke of help."

"Yes; the same horseman who routed the road-agents is pursuing and rapidly coming up with us. He will stop the horses in some way."

Again Thorne looked out of the window, only to start back with a cry of horror.

The narrow trail now wound round the side of a mountain. Upon one side of the trail, the mountain-side arose almost perpendicularly. Upon the other was a narrow cleft, or gully, that extended downward to an unknown depth, the brink being at the very edge of the trail.

And with the reins held in the nerveless hands of the dead driver, unguided, the horses were dragging the rocking stage along that narrow trail!

Thorne did not inform his companion of their perilous situation, although she seemed alarmed at his sudden exclamation, and questioned him as to the cause.

As soon as he regained his composure Thorne again looked out. He saw at once that the horses had slackened their pace, although they were yet moving along at great speed, and the coach was in great danger of toppling over the brink of the precipice.

He also saw that the red-breasted pursuer was close behind the stage.

Gradually the trail widened, but before it seemed that a horse could gain a footing there, the horseman drove along the very brink of the chasm, beside the stage!

Thorne saw at a glance that the reckless horseman was not a very young man, but his age did not exceed forty—he might be younger. His face, although not unpleasant, was rather stern-looking.

As he came alongside the stage, the horseman arose in the stirrups—stood upright upon the horse's back—then leaped!

He alighted upon the top of the stage, and a moment later had torn the reins from the grasp of the dead driver.

The black stallion fell back and trotted along behind the stage.

In a few moments the reckless man had the horses under control, and soon the stage drew up.

A moment later the door was thrown open, and the red-breasted man said quietly:

"All safe, I think—pardon, how is the lady?"

"Safe, thanks to you! Oh, sir, how can we ever repay you?"

The stranger made a careless gesture with his hand.

"By not overburdening me with thanks," he replied, with a rather unpleasant laugh. "Pardon me if I am rude, but an overdose of thanks makes one feel uncomfortable."

"But you will at least tell us your name?" cried Thorne.

"My name—well, by some I am called Red Robin, a name probably derived from the fact that I wear a scarlet vest. You may know me by that name."

"Well, Mr. Robin, if you did not dislike to be thanked—"

"I know, lady," with a smile that seemed more pleasant than before, "I will consider it as good as said.—But we must go on."

Closing the door, Red Robin climbed upon the stage, and soon they were moving onward toward Boulder Bar.

CHAPTER II.

STRANGE TELEGRAPHIC MESSAGES.

DESPITE the fact that Boulder Bar was a very youthful mining-strike, to use a Westernism, "it war jest er-boomin'."

The camp was situated on a large stream of water—Big Snake Creek was the name by which it was known—and numbered seventy-five or eighty places of abode and business at the time of which we write. There were saloons, dance-houses, rough cabins, tents and a huge barn-like hotel and gambling-house combined.

This latter building was owned by a small, smooth-faced man, who was known as Cyrus Gaines. He was a quick-motivated yet cool-appearing man, and had proven his ability to successfully conduct the "Clarion Hotel" by summarily disposing of various ugly customers, who had been disposed to cause him trouble.

Those who claimed to know said that Gaines was "chain lightning on the draw" and could shoot "plumb center, every time." The "beautiful way" in which he had laid out Pistol Bob, a noted terror and lightning shot himself, was

for the small man the sincere admiration of every spectator.

There were four graves back of the hotel, which were known as "Gaines's Cemetery."

Some claimed that the manner in which Cyrus Gaines had "wiped out" Idaho Bill, an old scout and miner, was a little unfair; but the citizens of Boulder Bar did not bother themselves about trifles, especially when a person of Cyrus Gaines's reputation was concerned.

People of all classes were rushing into the new strike, and at times the Clarion Hotel was filled to overflowing. Cyrus Gaines declared that he would never turn away a person from his house as long as he had a mouthful of food or a spare plank for a lodger to lie on.

The house was well supplied with servants, the most notable being the conceited-appearing and flashily dressed barkeeper.

The barkeeper's name, Simeon Small, seemed well-suited to him. He was a small, sickly-appearing chap, who dressed like a dandy, and "cut his style," something after the Eastern dude.

But he was able to take care of himself.

This was fully illustrated when Big Burgman mildly insinuated that Simeon was a "milk-sop from Milkville."

Then Simeon came over the bar.

The way he lit on Big Burg was a caution.

He wiped up the superfluous tobacco-juice upon the bar-room floor with the bully's manly form, then slid him across the room, stood him upon his feet, opened the door, and placing his foot against the north side of Burg's pantaloons, started him away toward the south, with a parting admonition not to come back till he was ready to apologize.

The next day the bully came back for his "bitters," and apologized.

After this affair, the barkeeper got along all right.

Adjoining the bar-room was a large dance and gambling apartment.

At one side of this room was an elevated stage for the use of the musicians. The floor immediately in front of this stage was cleared for the dancers.

At the opposite side of the room was a large number of deal-tables for the use of card players, and nightly were these tables well taken by the throng of miners and gamblers who frequented the place.

A little apart from these tables was a faro lay-out, which was presided over each night by Faro Kate, the Masked Queen, as she was called.

Faro Kate was a mystery.

When Cyrus Gaines first appeared at Boulder Bar no woman had been with him. He built the Clarion Hotel and gambling-house, and like magic, Faro Kate appeared.

From whence she came or when she came no one could tell. They found her there in the gaming-room ready for business.

She dressed in black and wore a black mask over her face, which entirely concealed her features. Down her back fell a long mass of raven-black hair.

From the time that she was first seen at the Bar, no one had ever seen her with her mask removed. Her voice, although not musical, was soft and low; but no one could tell whether the face beneath the mask was ravishingly beautiful or repulsively ugly. There were those, however, who were almost willing to stake their lives that the face beneath the mask was not an ugly one.

Some of the most observing citizens of the camp noticed that the masked woman was never seen in company with her employer, Cyrus Gaines; and at times Gaines would not be seen for many days, Faro Kate taking charge of the hotel during his absence.

It was said that Faro Kate dealt square, therefore her game was well patronized.

Among the early comers at the Clarion Saloon one evening was an individual who attracted much attention.

He was a tall, supple, yet muscular man of about forty. His clothes were cut to fit and showed off the graceful outlines of his perfect form. The short coat, which was open in front, showed a vest beneath that was of a bright red color. Not a weapon was visible upon his person, but in the side pockets of the short-skirted coat were a pair of gold-mounted, self-acting revolvers, ready for instant use. Upon his head he wore a wide-brimmed, dove-colored sombrero, encircled by a golden band, and fastened up at one side by a pin representing a red-breasted bird.

It was Red Robin, the Reckless.

After safely driving the stage into Boulder Bar, arriving there after dark, he only waited

to see that Howard Thorne was carefully attending to Sylva Blair, then, after seeing his noble horse carefully cared for, he sought refreshments for himself.

He registered in a little book at the bar, learned the number of his room, and a short time later was enjoying a very eatable supper in the dining-room of the hotel.

Later, he sauntered through the bar-room, and passing through the wide, sliding door, entered the saloon.

"Waal, who in blazes are he?" ejaculated Big Burg, looking after the red-breasted stranger.

"His name is on the book," said one.

Big Burg strode over to the bar, and with much trouble succeeded in spelling out the name.

"Red Robin!" he growled, in disgust. "He better not go ter h'istin' on airs roun' hyar, or I'll make him think he's er spring chicken."

Meanwhile Red Robin had seated himself at one of the deal-tables in the saloon and was taking a careless survey of the room and its inmates, many of whom were gazing inquiringly at him.

It was yet early in the evening, and the sports at the saloon had not yet begun. Many of those who came there regularly each night had not yet arrived.

Faro Kate was not to be seen.

One or two parties were engaged in social games at short cards, and one big, bewhiskered fellow sat all alone, idly drumming on a table with something he held in his hand.

There were a few females in the room, who were each and all chatting and laughing with some "feller," usually a heavy-booted, red-shirted miner.

Upon the stage a couple musicians were tuning their instruments and getting ready for business.

As he sat there, Red Robin fell to musing.

"Well," he murmured, indistinctly, "the trail leads me here—the secret is growing hot. That I am on the right track at last I am sure. For fifteen long years I have been hunting—hunting, bound to run the infernal villain, Faton Stone, to earth. I will do so yet—then vengeance!"

His face was not pleasant to look upon as he muttered those words. He continued:

"He has doubled and turned like a hunted fox. He is crafty, and for years I was off the trail; but once again I am hot after him. It seems that the lapse of years has only made my burning desire for vengeance more strong. God have mercy on him when I find him!—God have mercy!"

He looked up, to see Howard Thorne approaching.

The young man nodded pleasantly, and taking a chair, sat down near Red Robin.

"Mr. Robin," began Thorne, somewhat uneasily, noting the dark look upon the strange man's face, "I have not exactly sought you out for the purpose of thanking you, for I know thanks are distasteful to you, but you must know—"

"I do, my friend," said the Reckless, quietly; "I know all about it. I know how you would express yourself as being greatly obliged to me—I know how you would say that the young lady considered herself in the same box—I know how you would offer, if you could be of service to me, to be pleased to do so and so. In fact, young man, I know!"

Howard Thorne laughed softly.

"Then I will say no more—"

"Correct."

"But if you are in the least interested in the young lady who was in the hearse to-day, I will say that, at present she is stopping beneath this roof. For certain reasons, I fear that she is in danger here, and as I cannot be present at all times to look after her, I make bold to ask that, while you stop here, you look after her a little, and if anything unusual happens, inform me, at once."

"I will—so."

"If you will, I shall be so much obli—"

"Now, friend—don't say another word."

"Not another. Good-night." And with another quiet laugh, Howard departed.

A few moments later, a small door at one side of the room opened, and Faro Kate entered.

She advanced to the faro table, and took a seat behind it.

The musicians were still tuning their instruments, and the big, bewhiskered man was still drumming on the table, seemingly oblivious to what was going on around him.

Red Robin fixed his keen, penetrating eyes upon Faro Kate, and scrutinized her closely.

As there was no one waiting to "buck the tiger," Faro Kate sat down and, with a lead-pencil, began lightly drumming on the table.

As Red Robin idly watched her, he suddenly noticed something that at once attracted his attention.

While the Faro Queen was drumming on the table, the bewhiskered man was silent. The man's face was partly turned away from Faro Kate, and he seemed to be heedless of everything. But as soon as the woman stopped drumming, he began.

Red Robin saw method in this.

The Reckless had been a telegraph operator in his younger days, and he soon perceived that, by means of the seemingly objectless drumming, the bewhiskered man and the Faro Queen were communicating with each other.

He listened.

"Failed! She escaped—is here in camp."

This was the first message listened to by the red-breasted man.

Immediately Faro Kate drummed a reply.

"Have seen her. How did it happen?"

Red Robin listened intently.

"Was rescued by red-breasted man on the right! Reckless devil! Killed four—wounded five!"

To say that the "red-breasted man on the right" was interested would be expressing it mildly. He was more than interested.

The person first alluded to was, without doubt the young lady passenger in the stage, whom he had rescued from the outlaws. And there could be no uncertainty in regard to the last person referred to. It was himself.

And the bewhiskered man—who was he?

Red Robin at once concluded that he must be one of the outlaws whom he had put to rout that day. In all probability he had been sent to Boulder Bar as a messenger in the interest of the road-agents.

The Reckless soon saw that the halting of the stage had not been for plunder merely. From what he had heard, he came to the conclusion that the chief object of the outlaws had been to take Sylva Blair captive.

Handy Dave, the stage-driver, was a new man on the route, and had the reputation of running through half-a-dozen different road-agent bands; therefore, as they wished to make no failure in this particular attempt, the outlaws shot him dead.

Red Robin listened for the reply after the bewhiskered man had informed Faro Kate who the rescuer was and of the work he had done.

And the reply he heard was:

"Kill him!"

The message was a startling one, but the Reckless betrayed no emotion. He simply listened for further conversation.

"Correct. The girl?"

"Must be captured at once! See to it!"

Without attempting further communication, the man arose to his feet, and, seeming heedless of the presence of any one, left the saloon.

The miners were now flocking into the saloon; the dancers had formed on the floor, and in a few moments the music struck up and the dancing began.

Each night there was a short dance in the early part of the evening; then for two or three hours Faro Kate conducted her business uninterrupted by the music and shuffling feet; and again there was a longer dance, to finish up with. Sometimes it was near morning when the dancing ceased.

Red Robin paid no attention to the dancers, but from half-closed eyes he watched the Faro Queen.

"I would give something to look beneath that mask," he muttered. "So you want me killed? I wonder if this is purely revenge, or if you have a deeper motive. I have an idea that I can look out for Red Robin; but the girl is in danger—I will—"

But here he was interrupted by a sudden hubbub in the bar-room—whoops, oaths, then a pistol-shot!

CHAPTER III.

LIVELY TIMES IN THE BAR-ROOM.

EVIDENTLY there was trouble of some sort in the bar-room.

Following the pistol-shot came a second series of shouts and curses, which gradually subsided in a measure, although harsh voices could still be heard talking excitedly.

Slowly Red Robin arose to his feet, and sauntered leisurely toward the bar-room. He felt no particular interest in the affair, but his motto was "Anything for excitement," and therefore he made his way toward the room from whence the sounds came.

He stopped in the wide doorway and glanced around.

At one side of the room, with his back to the wall, was a huge, brawny man, who was dressed in a complete suit of buckskin, and looked more like a hunter or scout than a miner.

His face was covered with a luxuriant brown beard, and from beneath a wide brimmed hat, down upon his broad shoulders fell a mass of brown hair, making his appearance somewhat lion-like. A look of rough, good-natured honesty beamed in the depths of his deep blue eyes.

In his hand he held a revolver, and although weapons were visible in other hands, it was evidently he who had fired the shot.

Several roughs, headed by Big Burg, confronted the man against the wall. Every man had drawn a weapon.

Upon the floor between the man at bay and the rough lay a man as he had fallen when he was stricken down by the flying bullet.

It was a strange scene.

"Surrender, you blamed ole murderin' houn!" cried Big Burg, flourishing a revolver. "Surrender, or by blazes we'll fill you full o' holes! We'll pile ernuff lead inter you ter sink ye ter ther bottom o' ther sea! Come in, you ole cur!"

The old man laughed derisively.

"Ter Halifax with yer!" was his contemptuous reply, in deep, heavy tones. "Surrender—nothin'! Why blame yer eyes! who yer talkin' to anyhow? Ole Bumshell surrender! Ghost o' ther Pan Handle! ye'r crazy as er bed-bug!"

"Don't be er fool, ole man! We're five ag'in' ye, an' we mean business," the spokesman of the rough declared. "You hev killed Slim Jim, an' we'll hang ye fer ther bloody work. You had better give in."

"Why, durn yer homely mug!" exclaimed Old Bombshell, explosively. "Didn't I lay out ther blamed long-legged varlet in self-defense? Do you s'pose ther Border Boomerang w'd stan' still while ther gol-danged galoot used him fer er target? W'ot yer howlin' roun' heer fer, anyhow—?"

"Oh, let up on yer gab an' throw down yer weppins! We ain't er-goin' ter fool with yer any longer. You've done murder an' must suffer fer it. Slim Jim war my pard, an' I sw'ar his death shell be avenged!"

"Waal, you're ther blamedest goldinged on-reasonable son ov er Chinaman as I ever *did* see! Ther lays ther shootin'-iron aside ther feller, jist as he pulled on me. Plain case o' self-defense, an' still ye'r howlin' fer my gore. Mor'n thet, ther chap ain't half-dead. I only jist creased him, an' ef he ain't all right in ther mornin', I'll chaw my ole hat fer fodder."

At these words there was a movement of surprise among the roughs. Big Burg dropped down beside the fallen man, and after a hasty examination, said:

"Jim ain't dead yet, but he's that bad hit as he may die—ther chances are ag'in' him. It's er plain case o' attempted murder, and ther attempt may succeed. We don't want no murderers aroun' hyar, an' ther best way ter take care ov them is ter hang them ter ther nearest tree. Hey, boys?"

A growl of assent came from Big Burg's ruffianly followers.

"Ye see, ole man, everything are ag'in' ye," continued Big Burg, turning to the "Border Boomerang." "You attempted bloody murder—"

"Oh, fer Heving's sake, do chain up on thet!" snorted Old Bombshell. "Didn't ther durned galoot pull er pop on me?"

"But you provoked him—"

"Only jist knocked him down," interrupted the big man, with a good-natured smile. "Ther sassy long-shanks called me er liar, an' then I dumped his apple-cart. Like er fool, he got mad at er littla fun, an' war goin' ter sling cold lead. I knew sumbuddy w'd get hurt, so I jist cooled him off."

"An' ef he dies, you'll be a murderer," persisted the big rough; "so throw down yer guns an' cave, or we'll take ye."

Old Bombshell laughed derisively.

"Oh, cum an' take me! We'll hev er gentle leetle scrimmage heer as it will be *deed*lightful ter witness. Ghost o' ther Pan Handle! but won't it be er cirkiss!"

The Border Boomerang seemed anxious for the fray.

"Cuss ye!" gritted the bully; "we'll give ye a cirkuss in ther air at ther bottom eend o' er rope. Go fer ther bloody whelp! Down him, boys! Come on!"

Big Burg leaped toward Old Bombshell, a knife glittering in his hand. But he tripped over Red Robin's extended foot and fell flat upon his face on the floor.

The next instant the ruffian's followers found themselves gazing into the dark mouths of Red

Robin's revolvers, and as the Reckless sprang to Old Bombshell's side, he cried:

"Come on, gentlemen! Walk up and take your medicines. Don't hesitate a moment."

The roughs paused in surprise. Here was an unexpected turn in affairs. The sudden way in which their leader had measured his length on the floor somewhat astonished them; but the red-breasted man's leveled revolvers had more effect in halting them than anything else.

Upon old Bombshell's face was a half-smiling look of defiance; and their new adversary's countenance was marked with a look of reckless indifference to any peril or danger. No inferior foeman did they confront when they faced Red Robin and the Border Boomerang!

Swearing like a pirate, Big Burg arose to his feet, still grasping the murderous-looking knife in his hand. Half crouching, as though to leap forward, he glared fiercely at Red Robin, his thin lips drawn back from his wolfish-looking teeth.

But one of the red-breasted man's revolvers covered the bully, and although he longed to leap at the Reckless's throat, he dared make no such attempt.

Old Bombshell, although somewhat surprised by the stranger's interference, did not seem startled in the least. He smiled broadly as he saw Big Burg slowly arising to his feet after that heavy fall; but the smile quickly changed to a look of mock concern, as the big rough faced that way.

"Did it hurt ye much, bub?" the Boomerang inquired, seemingly with anxious interest. "You sh'd be careful whar ye step w'en ye'r in er hurry, my lad."

Big Burg paid no heed to the mocking words, but with his eyes still fastened on Red Robin, gritted out:

"Curse yer hide! you shell pay fer thet leetle trick with yer life!"

A careless laugh of amusement came from the lips of the red-breasted man. Without the least hesitation, he lowered his revolvers, speaking quietly:

"My life, eh? How do you propose to take it?"

Before replying, Big Burg thrust the knife he had drawn into its sheath. Then, as he suddenly jerked out a revolver, he cried:

"In this way! Move a finger and down you go!"

It seemed that Red Robin had foolishly lost the "drop," and that the ruffian held him at his mercy. Some of Big Burg's companions had "covered" Old Bombshell, and thus he was prevented from interfering.

"Now, darn your hide!" growled the bully.

"I swear by the holy poker I'll salt ye!"

Red Robin laughed with scornful recklessness.

"Shoot away, you big coward!" he exclaimed, contemptuously. "I'll wager something you can't hit my breast at ten paces. More than that, you are such a cowardly cur that you dare not fire!"

His words seemed to sting the rough to still fiercer anger. With an evil light of determination in his eyes, he took aim straight at the taunting man's breast, and said:

"Get ready! I swear I am going to fire! When I count three I shall pull trigger."

"Then take good aim," calmly advised Red Robin. "If you should miss, your reputation as a shootist is gone."

"An' ef he hits—" gasped Old Bombshell, now somewhat alarmed.

"But he won't hit. He can't hit a fair-sized barn-door at twenty paces."

"Oh, I can't, hey?" growled Big Burg.

"Wait jist a minute an' I'll show ye."

Big Burg was known to be a crack shot with rifle or revolver, and each one of his followers felt certain that if he fired, the red-breasted man would fall dead.

If Red Robin thought to shake the bully's nerves by his taunting talk, then he failed flatly; for, taking a steady aim at his red breast, Big Burg called out:

"Ready, now! I'm goin' ter count—"

"Say," interrupted the Reckless, "you let me do the counting and you attend to the shooting. One—two—"

A gasp ran around the room as the spectators caught their breaths. Then, clear and distinct, came the final word:

"Three!"

Almost simultaneously the revolver in Big Burg's hand exploded!

Then, to the amazement of every one, instead of dropping dead in his tracks, the red-breasted man stood there before them, to all appearance, unharmed.

A mocking laugh burst from his lips.

"Missed, as I knew he would. Friend, you can shoot a little bit."

"Thunder an' Mars!" exclaimed Old Bombshell, in astonishment.

Big Burg was fairly astounded. He had aimed fairly at Red Robin's scarlet breast, and had shot to kill; yet there before him stood the strange man, unharmed.

A gasping exclamation of astonishment came from the bully's lips, and for a moment he shrunk back as though in fear.

Then Red Robin's voice sounded sharply:

"Our turn now! Don't attempt to lift a weapon! The first man who tries it on eats cold lead!"

His revolvers were up and leveled now. So were those of Old Bombshell. In their amazement at the unexpected result of their leader's shot, the roughs had lost the advantage they had held. Red Robin and the Border Boomerang now had them at an advantage.

Old Bombshell smiled blandly.

"Rayther got ther deadwood on you folks, now ain't we? Takin' every thing inter consideration, I rayther think we've er pair o' Lisbon yarthquakes, done up in small bundles. Ef you fellers fool aroun' us, ye'r apt ter fall inter sorror."

Big Burg had now partially recovered from his astonishment, and had fully regained his composure.

Slim Jim, who as yet showed no signs of returning consciousness, had been dragged away.

"You've got ther drop," Big Burg admitted. "But I'll tell ye one thing—that red-breasted cuss dassen't fight me, man to man, fair an' square."

"Now, don't get such a conceited notion into your head," replied Red Robin. "I dare to meet you, but do not want to have anything to do with a villainous ruffian of your stamp."

"Bah! You take water! You're scared! I dare you to meet me face to face."

"Name the weapons."

"Knives!" hissed the bully, savagely.

"Correct," and from somewhere among his clothes the Reckless whipped out a slender knife. Without a moment's hesitation, he advanced toward the ruffian.

With a hoarse growl of savage delight, Big Burg again drew forth his murderous-looking knife and sprang toward his foe.

Red Robin paused, prepared for the onset, and the bully crouched a few feet away, ready for a spring.

"Now," he growled, "I'll carve ye up so that yer mammy w'dn't know ye. Oh, I'll jist cut ye all ter pieces!"

His fierce words elicited a derisive laugh from the red-breasted man. The next moment they met, knife to knife.

Then for a few moments the spectators saw an exhibition of knife-play that held them spell-bound and breathless. But it only lasted for a few moments; then Big Burg reeled back with a deep gash in the shoulder and a cut across the right wrist.

Red Robin was unharmed.

Bitter curses broke from the bully's lips.

"Whoop-ee!" shouted Old Bombshell, as he witnessed the result of the combat. "Ernuther feller's got his medicine! By the Roman gods, pard! you jist *kin* handle er carver!"

Suddenly, from some unknown source, a voice cried sharply:

"Capture the red-breasted man! A thousand dollars to the man who takes him alive! He is *Captain Mystery, the road-agent!*"

From whose lips these startling words came, no one could tell; but they produced the effect intended.

One moment's hesitation—then a dozen men sprang forward to seize Red Robin. Still grasping the slender knife, the Reckless fought them off.

Right into the thickest of the fray sprang Old Bombshell, his huge fists knocking the assailants like ten-pins.

"Whoop! hurray!" he shouted, striking sledge-hammer-like blows right and left. Heer's whar ye gits yer money's worth! Walk up an' take yer rations! Ghost o' ther Pan Handle! but ain't this jist sweet fun!"

For a time the two desperate men held their assailants good play; but finally they were borne backward, and it seemed that they must soon be overpowered.

Then from the lips of Old Bombshell came a short, sharp whistle. Once, twice the Boomerang whistled, then there was a crash of glass, and through the broken window came a huge animal—a large dog!

"At 'em, Lion! Sic 'em, ole boy!" shouted Old Bombshell.

With a muffled roar the huge animal obeyed his master's command, savagely attacking the crowd. In less than a minute the Border Boomerang and his dog were the victors.

Red Robin lay in a senseless heap on the floor, where he had been stricken down by a treacherous blow from behind.

Old Bombshell knew that as soon as the crowd recovered from their first defeat, they would again turn on him, therefore, with a cry of defiance, he threw open the door, and, followed by his dog, sprung out into the darkness.

CHAPTER IV.

OLD FOES MEET.

OLD BOMBHELL had escaped, but Red Robin was a prisoner.

The knife in the reckless man's hand had done terrible work. Although not a man had been slain, half-a-dozen had received dangerous cuts—gaping wounds that might prove fatal.

For a moment after Old Bombshell disappeared through the doorway, the roughs silently crouched in their tracks, still grasping their weapons in their hands. Only for a moment, then fierce oaths and curses sounded through the room.

"Hell's delight!" snarled Big Burg, as he sprang toward the unconscious form of the red-breasted man, a murderous light gleaming in his evil eyes. "We've got one of ther cusses. Stamp him out! Kill him!"

He sprang up in the air, intending to plant his feet fairly in the unconscious man's face, but even while his feet were suspended over Red Robin's face, a strong hand grasped him by the collar and jerked him backward. The rough staggered back to see a cocked revolver leveled at his head, and hear the thin, sharp voice of Simon Small, the barkeeper, exclaiming savagely:

"Enough of this! The man is down. No cold-blooded murdering in this ranch. You hear me!"

Big Burg uttered a grating curse, but he dared make no move while that leveled revolver covered his brain.

"Ther devilish houn'!" cried the bully. "Looker ther bloody slashin' he's done. Two digs on me, an' almost every one o' ther boys kin show er cut from his stabber. Let up, Sim! Let us at him!"

"No! Back with yer, every one, or I swear there will be cold meat lying loose around here!"

The barkeeper's eyes flashed fire, and the crowd that faced him knew that he meant every word he spoke.

"But ther p'isen cur—"

But Big Burg's words were cut short by Small, who continued:

"The fellow is unconscious. Now is the time to make him your prisoner, and—"

"Then we'll hang him!" cried a voice.

"He will undoubtedly hang," allowed the barkeeper. "Did you not hear some one call him Captain Mystery just before the fight? There is a price on his dead body, but twice as much will be paid to the one who takes him alive. He is our prisoner. If you have a purse of money, will you throw one-half of it away?"

The crowd was silent for a moment. Evidently Small's words were of heft with them. Then some one asked:

"How do you know this chap is Captain Mystery? What proof have we?"

"No proof, except that he is a suspicious character," the barkeeper admitted. "But the one who accused him of being the road-agent offered a thousand dollars for him, if captured alive. He is in our power and we will corral the ducats."

"But who was it as made ther offer?" cried another voice.

Each man gazed inquiringly at his neighbor, but no one answered.

"Looker hyar," Big Burg now spoke up, "I believe this are sum' durned game. I don't believe anybuddy wants ther galoot ernuff ter pay er thousan' dollars fer him."

A mutter of unbelief came from some of the rough's more intimate followers, but many of the crowd were silent.

Simeon Small saw that he must talk straight and plain, if he would hold the ground he had gained. He paid no heed to the bully, but appealed to the crowd:

"Now, gentlemen, let us not be hasty in this matter. The fellow is in our power. We can hold him until the one who offered the shekels for his capture shows up. If he fails to appear, why, then we can hang him."

"Blow this foolishness!" cried Big Burg. "Hang him, at—"

"Shut up!" came sharply from Small. "Open your big mouth again, and by the gods! I'll let daylight into you!"

The speaker's revolver was leveled fairly at the bully's head, and the barkeeper looked as though he had rather shoot than not. Burgman dared not continue his hot speech.

"Gentlemen, we have this man foul. We can securely bind him while unconscious, then carry him to the jail. There he will be secure. We can hold him for the reward. If he proves to be Captain Mystery, this night's work will be the best ever done in this camp."

The majority of the crowd seemed to agree with the barkeeper. Big Burg saw that, and knew that, for a time, at least, any attempt to take Red Robin's life or to hang him would be thwarted. With sullen anger, he turned and strode away toward the bar.

Simeon Small bent over the unconscious man, hastily examining his wound. But Robin had received a terrific blow on the back of the head, cutting open the scalp. The barkeeper saw at a glance that the wound was of little account.

The Reckless now showed signs of returning consciousness, and calling for a rope, which was soon brought him, Small deftly bound his hands and feet. Then he secured the prisoner's weapons.

"Now," said the barkeeper, "some of you fellows sack this chap ter ther jail. I will choose three men to stand guard over him, one inside ther jail, two outside. Silent Joe, Tom Blain, and Sam Hawks are the men for the job."

This seemed to meet the approval of the majority of the crowd. The three men named stepped forward at once, and giving the prisoner into their charge, Small warned them to use the utmost caution to prevent him from escaping. If a rescue was attempted, they were to fire their revolvers and alarm the camp.

The guards nodded their comprehension, and with the assistance of several others, they soon carried the prisoner to the little log jail.

He was tossed down upon the floor, or rather upon the ground, for there was no floor in the building. Silent Joe was chosen to remain inside with the prisoner, while the other two guards were to remain without.

A light was furnished for the benefit of Silent Joe, and after everything was satisfactorily arranged, the crowd retired, the door was securely fastened, and, with ready weapons, the guards stood on duty—that is, they stood on duty when they were not sitting down.

As soon as the jail door was closed, Silent Joe sat down with his back against the wall, and taking a pipe and tobacco, made preparation to enjoy a square smoke.

He paid little attention to the bound prisoner, who had recovered consciousness and was silently regarding him.

When he had filled the pipe, Joe lighted it, and, sitting down in a comfortable position, began puffing away in a lazy manner. He could hear his companions outside talking in low, muffled tones as he sat there smoking and thinking. What did they want of a guard in there, anyway? The prisoner was all right. The mumbling conversation of the guards outside grew fainter and fainter, it sounded far away, and seemed still receding, and then—

Silent Joe sprang to his feet, fully awake, jerking forth a revolver as he arose. He knew he had slept, but how long he could not tell. Something had awakened him.

His first thought was of the prisoner, but it took only a glance to show him that Red Robin was safe. But the jail door was open, however, and a man was advancing through the doorway into the room. The visitor wore a full mask, that completely concealed his features.

Quick as thought, Silent Joe covered the masked man, crying sharply:

"Halt, there! Who in blazes—"

But the stranger made a quick movement with his hand, and instantly Joe lowered his revolver.

"I didn't know—"

"All right, Joe," interrupted the masked man. "You were right. I came in rather suddenly."

"Guess I must 'a' been a-snoozin'," said Joe, with a rueful grin. "I set down ter smoke, an' I sw'ar I must 'a' went clean off ther hooks. 'Scuse me—"

"Never mind it now, Joe; I see the prisoner is safe. I came in to see him. Thought perhaps he'd like the pleasure of making my acquaintance. If you will give us the room—"

"Certainly; to be course I will," and with a curious, questioning glance at the masked man, Joe left the room, carefully closing the door, leaving the prisoner and his visitor together.

The masked man stood over the prisoner, and with folded arms regarded him silently.

Red Robin scrutinized his visitor closely, and finally, thinking the man was never going to speak, he said:

"Good-evening."

Yet the masked man did not speak. There he stood, grim and silent.

Red Robin uttered a harsh, scornful laugh.

"Dumb or deaf; perhaps both. Now that's too bad, for I don't know a single letter of the deaf mutes' alphabet."

"Neither deaf nor dumb, Morton Dunbar!"

The man's voice was hoarse, evidently from suppressed emotion.

For a moment it seemed that a look of startled surprise flitted over Red Robin's face. But only for a moment, and then he looked his visitor fairly in the face, saying coolly:

"Now don't go to calling a fellow names, just because he's down. It ain't fair, any way you put it."

"Bah!" fiercely exclaimed the mask. "Don't try that on me. I know you—know you well. Whatever you may call yourself now—"

"Red Robin is the name I go by."

"Yes, I know that is the name you go by, but your true name is Morton Dunbar."

The Reckless laughed shortly.

"Perhaps I don't know my own name. It is possible that I may have laid it down somewhere and picked up the one I now carry around in its place."

"That's just it. You dropped the name you bore years ago and assumed the one by which you are now known."

"You seem confident, but you may be in error just the same. As good men as you or I have made mistakes before this date."

"But I have made no mistake. I know you, Morton Dunbar. You cannot bluff me, and an attempt to bluff me is but time and breath wasted."

"Well, naow," slowly drawled the prisoner, "you are the most knowing chap I have struck for many a day. You actually know too much to live. It's a wonder that you are spared—"

"Oh, let up on that!" exclaimed the masked man. "I tell you it is useless to try to bluff me. I know your whole story. If you doubt my word, I will tell it to you."

"A story? Is it interesting? Anything for amusement. Drive ahead."

The masked man sunk down beside Red Robin. A red light seemed to gleam from the eyes that could be seen through the holes in the mask. He began; speaking slowly and distinctly.

"Twenty years ago, in a large Eastern city, lived a prosperous merchant who was the proud father of a queenly daughter. If ever earthly woman was beautiful, this one was. She had scores of lovers, any of whom she could make her devoted slave by a look or a smile. Men of rank, men of money and men of talent sought her hand, only to meet with disappointment. Among her lovers were three persons with whom my story has to deal. Two were friends and companions, aged respectively twenty-one and twenty-eight years. The name of the older was Barret Dorne; that of the younger, Faton Stone."

The masked man paused, closely scanning the listener's face. But he saw nothing to satisfy him—not a visible sign of emotion.

He continued:

"Barret Dorne was a big, good-natured fellow, with a frank, open face and hearty manner. Faton Stone was a nervous, hot-headed, impulsive fellow. Dorne had a lucrative position in a prosperous manufacturing establishment; while on the other hand, Stone was nothing but a poor dry-goods clerk."

"The name of number three was Morton Dunbar. He was a handsome, dark-eyed chap—just the fellow to capture the heart of a golden-haired blonde. He was a telegraph operator, at a salary of sixty-five dollars a month."

"Now all three of these fellows were desperately in love with Ethel Irving."

Again the narrator paused, closely scanning the face of the man before him. For a moment a strange, uninterpretable look rested upon Red Robin's face; but a second later his features were rigidly set with the stern, hard look common to them.

The masked man noted the look, and a short laugh of triumph broke from his lips.

"That name brought you, as I thought it would. You had been preparing for it, but could not control yourself when I uttered the name. But to continue:

"Stone proposed, and to his chagrin, he was quietly rejected. Dorne followed suit and met

with a similar fate. While Dorne submitted to the refusal like a whipped cur, Stone was thoroughly angered. He resolved not to give the girl up without a struggle. She was a prize worth striving for, not mentioning old Irving's shekels. No one can picture Stone's wild anger when, a few months later, he learned that Ethel Irving had married Morton Dunbar. He was furious and swore to have revenge on the young man, whom he had always hated, and who had stolen his prize from him. The very night after he learned of the marriage, he filled himself with liquor until he was insanely intoxicated. He quarreled with his friend, Barret Dorne, stabbed him to death, and, after robbing the body, fled. It matters little where he went; he got beyond the reach of the law.

"He sent a message to Morton Dunbar, swearing to take vengeance. Whether this letter was ever received he did not know.

"It was three years later when Morton Dunbar's little daughter was abducted. The father found a brief note, telling him that his old rival had done the deed, and thus obtained the vengeance he had sworn to have. The blow killed the mother—beautiful Ethel—and sent the father out into the world to search for his lost daughter and her abductor. It was said that over the body of his dead wife he swore to have a fearful revenge on the one who had caused all the misery, but his oath yet remains unfulfilled."

"But it shall be!" cried Red Robin. "It shall be, every word!"

"Never!" was the fierce reply. "You are at my mercy, Morton Dunbar, and I am—Faton Stone!"

He tore away the mask, and for a few moments the two bitter foes glared into each others eyes. Then Stone fairly hissed:

"You have sought to hunt me down, but you are now at my mercy. I shall kill you! then my vengeance will be complete. *Die, curse you! die!*"

And whipping out a knife, he seized Red Robin by the throat, murder gleaming in his evil eyes!

CHAPTER V.

SYLVA BLAIR IS ABDUCTED.

SYLVA BLAIR firmly expected that her father would meet her as soon as she reached Bowlder Bar, but she was doomed to disappointment. As Howard Thorne gallantly assisted her to alight from the stage, she looked eagerly around for her father, but failed to see his face among the many revealed by the light of the swinging lamp, suspended above the door of the Clarion Hotel.

She knew not why, but for a moment a sudden fear seemed to seize her, and she pressed one hand to her bosom.

Howard Thorne saw the white, frightened look upon her face, and said hastily:

"Are you ill, Miss Blair? You are pale and your hand trembles."

For a moment she could not reply, but, with an effort, she forced a nervous little laugh, and answered:

"No, not ill. I fear, though, that my nerves are shaken by that affair with the road-agents and that dreadful runaway. For a moment, being in a strange place, a sudden faintness seized me."

Again she glanced searchingly and anxiously around.

"My father—where is he? He should be here to meet me."

Again the belief that there was something wrong about the affair came back to Howard Thorne. He could hardly bring himself to believe that Henry Blair would wish to have his daughter come to a camp so isolated as Bowlder Bar, and of such a rough character as that place. But even if he did, it was not likely that he would allow the young girl to make the journey alone through the rough country. And more suspicious than everything else was the fact that her father did not meet her as soon as she reached the camp.

"Isn't your father here?" he asked, slowly, at the same time glancing over the faces of the spectators, who had now learned of the driver's death and were talking excitedly. "He should be."

At this moment a handsome, gentlemanly-appearing man came hurriedly forward, with his right hand outstretched.

"Howard, my son," he exclaimed, "you have arrived at last!"

The young man greeted his father warmly, exchanging a few words with him. Then he turned to the girl, who was still standing beside him, a fearful, troubled look in her eyes.

"Miss Blair, it is evident that your father is not here at present, but he can probably be easily found. Until I can make inquiries for him, my father's house is open to you. Shall I escort you there?"

For a few moments the young lady hesitated; then she said decidedly:

"No, I don't think I will go, many thanks to you for your kindness. I believe I will stop here at the hotel. If father should come for me, he would find me more quickly if I were here."

Thorne tried to persuade her to change her mind, but finding his efforts useless, he volunteered to secure a room for her and make all necessary arrangements.

When he had done this, he bade Sylva good-night and left the hotel. The moment he stepped outside, half a dozen of the excited crowd around the stage pounced upon him and demanded to know the facts concerning the driver's death. He tried to shake them off and escape from their detaining hands, but the effort was a failure.

Then it must be acknowledged that, in order to escape from their hands as soon as possible, Howard twisted the truth somewhat. A few short sentences he uttered, the eager listeners catching only a part of what he said, but enough to form an opinion of the manner in which the driver met his fate.

"Road-agent—back a piece—called a halt—driver ran through the line—was shot—pulled the stage through—died from wound."

It was well for Red Robin that Thorne did not tell the true story of the encounter with the road-agents, for the crowd would have pestered the red-breasted man with their questions. As it was, he escaped almost unnoticed.

When he had uttered the few short, broken sentences given above, Thorne broke away from the hands that sought to detain him, and joined his father, who was waiting for him, and they disappeared in the darkness.

Meanwhile Sylva Blair had ascended to her room, escorted by a servant. She found the room small and uncomfortable, the walls being rough and unplastered boards.

She asked to have supper served in her room, and soon found herself seated before a small, rough table, upon which were spread such luxuries as the hotel afforded. Despite the excitement of the past hour and the disappointment at not meeting her father, she ate heartily, and felt much refreshed.

When she had finished, she threw open the window of her room, and sitting down by it, gazed out into the darkness, thinking—thinking.

Beneath the window there was a sloping-roofed shed that connected the stable with the hotel. She noted this, and looked around at the dim outlines of the few huts and buildings that could be seen in the darkness, but could form no idea of the camp by what she could see.

She had fallen into a drowsy, half-conscious reverie, when she was startled wide-awake by the sound of a sudden shot coming from the lower part of the hotel. Then she heard angry and excited voices loudly talking.

Pressing her hand to her throbbing bosom, for she had been frightened by the sudden sounds, she listened to hear the sounds gradually subside until only an indistinct murmur of voices could be heard. Still she sat there, listening, listening.

It was some time later when she again heard a shot. Then came another pause of a few minutes, and then once more fierce angry cries and the sounds of a struggle came to her ears.

She started to her feet, listening to the commotion below. It lasted only a short time, but it raged fiercely while it did last.

When the sounds of the struggle had died away, she sunk on the rude bed, exhausted by the excitement caused by what she had so recently seen and heard.

It seemed hours after before she fell into a troubled sleep filled with horrible dreams. Finally she dreamed that she was lying in that very room and upon the very bed upon which she was lying. She remembered that she had left her window open and tried to arise and close it. But some invisible power seemed to hold her chained to the bed. Then she thought that out in the darkness a fierce-looking man was crawling slowly along the shed-roof toward her window. She tried to cry out, but an iron hand seemed gripping her tongue. Slowly the man crawled along until he came to the window; then he arose and noiselessly crawled into the room. With a cat-like tread, he advanced toward the bed. Nearer—nearer he came, until he stood over her. Then, suddenly he grasped

her by the throat! She seemed choking—choking! She struggled fiercely, trying to cry out, and then—

She awoke to find that, in truth, an iron hand was on her throat and something that gave out a sickening odor was being pressed over her mouth and nostrils. She could see nothing, for a black mist swam before her eyes. Oh! the horror of her position!

She tried to cry for help, but could not utter a sound. She felt her senses reel—everything seemed going round—then she became unconscious!

A ugly cackle of satisfaction came from a villainous-looking man who held the chloroformed sponge to her nostrils.

"Easy enough," he muttered.

"Worked just as slick as slidin' off er log. Expected she'd wake up when I war climbin' in ther windy an' raise a squall. Blamed ef she knew er thing till I had her foul."

He lifted the unconscious girl in his arms and bore her quickly to the open window. He thrust her out, and lowering her carefully downward, called out in guarded tones:

"Look a little cut, pard! Hyar ye go!"

"Got 'er, Jack. Let go," came from a dark form on the shed-roof.

The kidnapper obeyed, and then climbed softly out of the window himself.

His companion was already half-way along the roof toward the place where a short ladder leaned against the shed. He did not stop for the ladder, but swiftly creeping down the roof dropped to the ground.

When his companion reached the ground with the girl, he was ready with the horses, and mounted upon one of them.

"Pass her up, mate," said the mounted man, in a low tone. "This are jist ther slickest little job as I ever *did* hev er finger in."

The other laughed softly as he passed the girl up to his companion. Then he quickly mounted his own horse, and the two kidnappers rode around the stable into the street.

The final dance in the saloon was just taking place, and the sounds of shuffling feet and lively strains of music could be plainly heard; but, for the most part, the camp seemed silent and deserted.

The kidnappers turned down the street; but at this moment, the sound of rattling shots, the savage bark of a dog and wild cries of rage or terror came to their ears.

They pulled up in alarm.

"Curse it! What does that mean?" growled one of the men.

"Dunno," replied his companion. "It sounds like it came from near ther jail. Perhaps er rescue is being attempted."

"Waal, what are we a-goin' ter do? Ther hull blasted camp will be erwake in jist erbout a minute."

"Our road is by ther jail, an' that's ther way we must go. Cum on!"

Putting their horses into a gallop, they dashed swiftly down by the jail.

As they passed the little log building, two dark forms sprung out through the open doorway. One cried out to them, but they did not pause, and the bullets that came singing around their heads only caused them to urge their horses on the faster.

CHAPTER VI.

OLD BOMBHELL TO THE RESCUE.

FOR a few moments that deadly knife was held suspended before Red Robin's eyes, preparatory to the stroke that should end his life. There was a beastly look of rage upon the contorted face of Faton Stone, and a devilish light burned in his black eyes.

Calmly, without even a tremor, the Reckless gazed into the eyes of his deadly foe, expecting almost instant death at Stone's hands, yet not making a struggle, or even attempting to cry out. Indeed, he could not have cried out had he tried, for his bitter enemy grasped his throat with an iron grip!

But at this instant startling sounds came to the ears of the two men, causing Faton Stone to pause a moment in alarm and listen intently. First came what seemed a rattling, uneven volley of pistol-shots, then wild, hoarse shouts, intermingled with cries of fear and the loud, bellowing bark of a dog.

Suddenly the jail door was hurled open, and a panther-like form bounded in, alighting upon Faton Stone and hurling him flat upon his back, the knife flying far beyond his reach. Then he felt sharp teeth in the clothes at his throat!

"Hold him, purp! Hang to ther measly cur!" cried a familiar voice, and Old Bombshell bounded through the doorway. "By ther Roman

gods, pard! I reckon ole Lion an' the Border Boomerang war jist in time. It raythur look es ef we didn't poke our noses inter this heer game any too suddint-like. Blamed ef ther pesky snake wasn't goin' ter stick ye!"

The speaker quickly cut Red Robin's bonds, continuing hurriedly:

"Speet you thort ther ole man had gone back onto ye, pard, but he ain't made o' thet kinder stuff. Thort they'd laid ye plumb out fer good w'en I see'd ye measurin' ther floor with yer karkiss. Ole Bombsuell never w'd deserted ye ef he hadn't thort ye was er gone coon, fer he's—"

But Red Robin interrupted him with a gesture.

"Say no more, friend. You did right, and even if you had not, this little piece of work more than balances it— But this devil, here— His life is mine! Call off your dog!"

"Easy, pard," interrupted the Boomerang, following with the exclamations: "Hark! Listen! By ther Roman gods, mate! they're comin', critter-back an' red-hot! Out! out! or we're in er trap!"

Half-pushing, half-leading Red Robin, who attempted to turn back, Old Bombshell succeeded in getting him through the door, just as the two kidnappers, bearing the unconscious form of Sylva Blair, dashed by. They both saw that one of the horsemen held what seemed to be a large bundle in his arms, but in the darkness, they could not distinguish what the bundle was.

More to hasten the horsemen's flight than for any other reason, Old Bombshell called out for them to halt, then sent several bullets whistling harmlessly after them.

"Ha! ha! ha!" laughed the Boomerang. "Thet jist sets 'em er scootin'. Nothin' like ther zip o' er bullet to hasten er leggin' man's pace. It'll hasten him rite erlong."

"Did you notice the bundle one carried? I wonder what it was? It looked like a woman's lifeless form."

"Blamed if it didn't! an' them fellers acted jess as ef they'd been kort stealin' sheep. Hang it! there was suthin' wrong— Ghost o' ther Pan Handle!"

The exclamation was caused by the speaker catching a glimpse of a shadowy form skulking along in the dark shadow of the huts upon the opposite side of the street. Even as he cried out, a spout of flame shot out from the dark form, followed by the *zip-chug!* of a bullet as it passed his head and buried itself in the logs of the jail.

Almost instantly, Old Bombshell answered the shot, and there was a cry of pain that told that the bullet had not gone amiss.

Then the shadows seemed to resolve themselves into a score of dark forms that came charging down toward the two men by the jail, yelling and firing as they came. Other dark forms bounded out of the now open doorways of several cabins and joined in the charge.

"Thunder an' Mars!" shouted Old Bombshell. "Heer they cum, a clean little million of 'em, jist er gnashin' their teeth fer our gore. This way, pard; foller me," and whistling to his dog he dashed around the corner of the jail, closely followed by Red Robin.

Up in their path rose a man, firing as he arose. Old Bombshell felt the sting of the bullet as it grazed along his right side, but kept right on, his huge fist knocking the man end over end before he could repeat the shot.

Behind them came the crowd, yelling like demons.

They ran but a short distance when they came to where two horses were standing. One belonged to the Border Boomerang, the other, to his great joy, Red Robin recognized as his own black stallion.

As they leaped upon the horses' backs, Old Bombshell thrust a revolver into the red-breasted man's hand, saying quickly:

"Take 'er, pard; you'll need 'er."

Then, quick as a flash, they wheeled and charged directly back toward their yelling foes. Old Bombshell, with his hands untrammelled by the bridle-rein, held two revolvers, which seemed to crack almost incessantly, the weapon in Red Robin's hand filling up the pauses.

Taken by surprise by this unexpected move, the pursuers scattered right and left, although still firing an occasional shot at the horsemen.

Right back by the jail and down the main street of the camp dashed the two daring men.

"Whoop! Hurray!" shouted old Bombshell. "That's the way ter do it! Blowed if we didn't scatter 'em all over the east end o' ther camp. Pard, they know how it is now ter run ergin' er cupple o' Lisbon yarthquakes in disguise."

"Bombshell," cried the red-breasted man, "I must have my weapons. I think the bartender at the Clarion House has them."

"You shell have 'em," was the quick reply. "You go in an' get 'em, while I keep ther yellin' curs at bay. Lively, pard!"

They drew up in front of the Clarion House, and flinging himself from the saddle, Red Robin rushed into the bar-room. The final dance for the night was in progress, and the music and shuffling feet drowned any moderately loud sound coming from the bar-room, which was now deserted by all but Small, the bartender, who was nodding in a sleepy manner.

When the door was hurled open, Small was aroused, only to find his brain covered by a revolver held in the hands of the man whom he supposed to be at that time a safe prisoner in the jail. It was a complete surprise for him.

"My weapons—lively now! I want them!" hissed Red Robin, a burning glare in his dark eyes. "Produce them, or by the heaven above us, I'll kill you where you sit!"

Small was not a coward, but the light he saw gleaming in the speaker's eyes warned him that to trifle then meant death. He turned to where the weapons were lying upon a shelf, a warning word from the Reckless causing him to pass over the revolvers with the muzzle toward himself.

When he had secured his trusty weapons, Red Robin backed to the door, still holding the bartender covered. A moment later he joined Old Bombshell, just as he opened fire upon the pursuers, who had recovered from their defeat and were now hastening after the escaping prisoner and his assistant.

"Jist in time, pard," cried the Boomerang, as Red Robin leaped into the saddle. "They're cumin' red-hot an' still er-heatin'! Now we're off," and he uttered a yell of defiance, as they dashed away.

Some of the pursuers were mounted, and such as were came on after them, urging their horses to their fastest speed. Both of the fugitives were mounted upon magnificent horses, and they had little fear of their success in escaping.

"Heer 'em yell," said Old Bombshell, as they galloped along.

"Snarling like a pack of wolves!" grated Red Robin. "Let them snarl; their prey has escaped them. Ha!" he exclaimed, as a bullet sped dangerously near his head. "That fellow is getting a little too near for safety."

Half-wheeling in the saddle, he fired a single shot over his shoulder. The horse of the foremost pursuer went down in a heap, flinging its rider over its head.

"By the Roman gods, pard! but you do sling lead kinder keerless like!" exclaimed Red Robin's companion. "Blest ef I'd want ye ter use me fer er target! You're too durned keerless! Jess as likely es anyway you'd hit er feller fu'st off."

"The wolves have stopped," said the Reckless, as he looked back, paying no attention to Old Bombshell's words. "It is useless for them to pursue us; we could soon lose them in the darkness. I suppose by this night's work we shall get our name up. They will probably proclaim us outlaws."

"Let 'em proclaim! Ghost o' ther Pan Handle! S'pose er feller's goin' ter stan' round an' let half-a-dozen of them blamed galoots wipe him out! Durn their hides!"

"They may not go far enough to call us outlaws. It was only the rougher class who were engaged in the affair. Faton Stone is at their head, I think."

Old Bombshell nearly fell from his horse, but finally he succeeded in gasping out:

"Faton Stone—who's him?"

"My deadly foe—the villain who had his fingers at my throat and a knife suspended over my heart when you came to the rescue!"

There was no touch of anger or excitement in those even tones, yet the voice had a cold, hard sound that startled Old Bombshell. It was some moments before he spoke.

"I didn't take er peek at ther critter ter-nite, an' all I know erbout it are that, to my knowledge, there's no Faton Stone 'round here."

The Reckless did not reply at once, and for some time they rode along through the darkness in silence, Old Bombshell leading the way. At their horses' heels trotted Bombshell's big, faithful dog, Lion. They were making their way into the hills.

Finally Red Robin spoke:

"I shall go back to Bowlder Bar. Faton Stone is there, and he is the man I am after."

"But you ain't er-goin' back now, pard?" cried the Border Boomerang, quickly. "You w'u'dn't think ov et!"

"Not to-night. It would be useless. I must

go back in disguise, but where to procure the disguise is what bothers me."

"I hev w'ot you want," declared Old Bombshell, "jist ther very thing."

"You?" in surprise.

"Yes, me. Ye see thar war er detective chap as cum heer on er little business, an' fallin' in with me, stopped at my shanty. He had er host o' disguises, an' when ther feller w'ot he war after wiped him out, why ye see I fell heir to his traps an' hev got 'em now."

"Good! Without doubt I can find just what I want among them. But your shanty—where is it?"

"Up heer among ther hills a piece. It are a deserted cabin as I run onter w'en I struck this part o' ther kentry. I've lived thar ever since."

They turned into a narrow defile among the hills, where it was densely dark. Old Bombshell led the way, and without attempting to guide his horse, Red Robin followed, allowing his stallion to follow Bombshell's horse. For quite a distance they proceeded in this manner, and each moment the defile grew narrower and narrower, darker and darker.

Suddenly the defile debouched into an opening of some kind—in the darkness, Red Robin could not make out exactly what. He followed Old Bombshell across the opening to where a small cabin stood at the base of an abrupt ascent.

"Heer we are," Bombshell announced springing to the ground. "Light, pard, light."

The Reckless dismounted, and taking both horses by the bits, the Border Boomerang led them away to his "pasture," as he called it. In a few moments, he returned and led the way into the hut, Red Robin following.

A candle was quickly lighted, and the good-natured voice of the host was heard saying:

"Make yerself ter hum, pard. Things ain't quite ser nice as they might be, but then, you know how it are, yerself."

Red Robin saw that the room was scantily and rudely furnished, but this was as he had expected.

Old Bombshell "hustled things," as he expressed it, and quickly had a meal of cold bread, meat and water upon the table. Then he invited his guest to "sot up an' fill."

After they had eaten, the two men sat silently thinking, exchanging scarcely a word. Old Bombshell had lighted his pipe, and was sending out heavy clouds of smoke. Through these clouds, Red Robin caught occasional glimpses of his companion's face and he noticed that it looked very grave, even gloomy.

Finally Red Robin threw himself upon the bed of blankets and skins in one corner of the room. Old Bombshell was still sitting, silently thinking, a deeply moody look upon his face, his pipe, which had now gone out, held in the long fingers of his large yet shapely hand. To Red Robin it seemed as though there was something strangely familiar about the man's face—a face that it seemed he had seen at some time in the dim past. Where, he could not tell.

Old Bombshell was still sitting, silent and moody, when Red Robin fell asleep.

CHAPTER VII.

FATO KATE FIRES A SHOT.

"Cum, pard, turn out. Ghost o' ther Pan Handle! I believe you'd sleep all day!"

Red Robin awoke to find that it was broad daylight, and that Old Bombshell was standing near by, a good-natured smile on his face.

"You sleep hard, you do," declared the Border Boomerang. "Why, bless ye, man! an Injun w'd take yer scalp while ye war er snoozin' an' you'd never know et."

"It's not often I sleep that way," replied the other. "Perhaps the fact that, previous to last night, I have hardly slept a wink for three nights had something to do with my sleeping so soundly last night. Usually the tread of a cat will awaken me."

"Thet's ther way ter sleep w'en yer in er red-skin country—ready ter jump an' shoot at er seekunt's notiss.—But, pard, breakfast are ready."

As soon as Red Robin had performed his morning ablution, they sat down to the table.

"Pard," said Old Bombshell, as they were eating, "I've been er thinkin' over that leetle affair in the bar-room ov the Clarion Howtellas' nite, an' ther more I think ov et, ther more it seems as ef et war er putt-up-job onto yer humble sarvant. Can't get thet idee out ov my ole noddle anyhow. Reckon thet blamed slim-shanks didn't pick er quarrel with me jess fer ther fun ov et."

"There was certainly something that did not appear upon the surface, to a part of that little

affair, at least," was the reply. "I was accused of being Captain Mystery, the road-agent chief, by a party who surely took no open hand in the game, although, without doubt, he had great influence with the majority of the crowd with whom we had the little difficulty."

"Who was ther condurned sneakin' varlet as whooped out thet you war Captain Mystery? I didn't see er blamed soul thet I c'd fissen et onter. The consarned critter must 'a' been hid sumwhere or odder."

"It was Faton Stone. I know his voice. He was hidden somewhere, or else present in disguise. I thought the voice came from the dance-room; but there were some of the crowd in front of the door, and I could see no one whom I thought the author of the accusation. I know that my deadly foe was in league with the ruffians who took me prisoner, if not their leader. The ready manner in which he was admitted to the jail proves this."

"Waal, by ther Roman gods, pard! they hed us in mighty snug quarters onc't. W'en they laid you out—dead as hay, I thought—things looked durned squally fer ther Border Boomerang. Guess they'd roped in ther ole man too ef it hedn't been fer ole Lion, my dog. Pard—" pointing to the dog that was sitting beside him, with an intelligent look upon its face—"thetair animile knows more than two-thirds o' ther human critters in Bowlder Bar."

But Red Robin only half heeded his words, nodding abstractedly in reply. For several moments he ate slowly in silence. Finally he said:

"Maybe you thought it strange that I took a hand in that affair last night, but seeing you beset by the crowd of roughs, I could not resist the temptation to take a hand with the weaker side."

"An' et may be as how you thort et mighty strange thet I sh'd desert ye jist w'en ye war down; but pard, I sw'ar I thort ye'd flew'd over ther river; an' ther chances war, ef I loafed aroun' thar much longer, I'd take a flew too. So I slid. I hung roun', not knowin' fer sure ef ye war really defunked, an' w'en I see'd 'em sackin' ye to ther jail, I made up my mind ter hev ye out o' ther afore mornin' an' I dun it."

"You did, Bombshell, and it will be a long day before I forget it. You came just in time to save me from the knife of Faton Stone. In one more minute you would have been too late. Had it not been for the dog, I doubt if you could have saved me even then."

"Ole Lion's generally pritty handy on sich occasions," declared old Bombshell, bestowing a look of pride upon the dog. "He's helped ole man out ov mor'n er dozen tuff scrapes. But, pard, wot kind ov an idee hev ye got inter yer head erbout them 'ere chaps as went cavortin' by ther jail jess as we kem out ther door?"

"I haven't thought anything about it, Bombshell. What makes you ask? Do you think there was anything wrong about them?"

"Blamed ef I don't! One thing's sart'in—they warn't er part ov ther other crowd as we hed ter buck ergin'. They war jist er skootin' fer tall timber, es fast es ther hoss-critters c'd leg it. Ther bullets as I sent arter 'em, jist started 'em erlong ther faster. Ghost o' ther Pan Handle! how they did skoot!"

"They probably were some miners, striking out of camp for their cabin, somewhere among the hills. Perhaps they thought we were drunk and urged their horses to get out of the way of our bullets."

Old Bombshell shook his head decidedly.

"I can't jist swaller thet idee," he said. "It may be so, but then I don't jist look at et in thet way. Kinder strikes me like es ef they'd been up ter sum shenanigan, an' war skootin' fer et. You noticed ther big bundle they had an' sed et looked like er woman. Blamed ef I don't believe et war er woman, pard!"

The Reckless started. He remembered the brief interview with Howard Thorne, and how the young man had declared that he believed Sylva Blair in danger. Could it be—

Red Robin sprung up, exclaiming:

"You may be right Bombshell! It is possible that the bundle was a woman. If so, she was carried away by the agents of Captain Mystery. Should this prove true, your service may be required to help hunt out the outlaws' nest—that is, providing you are willing to do so."

"Count on me, pard, an' by ther Roman gods! I won't fail ye. Ther Border Boomerang will be on band ter take er hand in any game as is played ag'in' the outlaw, Captain Mystery."

"Good! Now help me to disguise, and I will hasten back to Bowlder Bar, and soon find out about this affair."

Old Bombshell at once produced the disguise left in his possession by the deceased detective.

With his host's assistance, Red Robin soon disguised himself as a rough, bearded, weather-beaten miner, and was soon prepared to return to the camp from which he had fled the night before.

"Ah!" he exclaimed, "my horse! Some of them may know it! What's to be done about that?"

"I hev er couple horses, pard. 'Tain't very offen as I use one on 'em. You may hev her, an' I reckon as how they'll never tumble ter ther trick on that account."

With some reluctance the Reckless consented. He did not like to use any but his own trusty stallion, but on this occasion he was obliged to do otherwise.

"I'm a-goin' with ye, pard," Old Bombshell declared. "Thet is, I'm a-goin' part way. I'll be down Big Cat Canyon jist er piece, an' if suthin' has gone wrong, you kin mighty easy let me know."

They mounted their horses and started, Bombshell's dog following them. A rapid ride, lasting less than an hour, took them in sight of the camp.

Leaving Old Bombshell a short distance down the canyon, beyond the outskirts of the camp, Red Robin rode on alone. He entered the camp, and made his way directly toward the Clarion Hotel.

Arriving at the hotel, he found a number of men upon the steps talking earnestly. Reining up the horse, he sat quietly in the saddle, listening to the conversation. He soon found that they were talking of the daring manner in which one man, unassisted, save by a dog, had put the guard to rout and rescued a prisoner from the jail. That prisoner he knew was himself.

"It was a darin' piece o' business," one rough fellow declared.

"Yes, an' ther rescuer war ther same ole cuss what we had cornered in the bar-room las' nite," put in another.

"Does any one know him?"

"He calls himself Ole Bombshell, an' he hangs out somewhar's back hyar among ther hills."

"I heer thet Cyrus Gaines has stuck up er notiss offerin' er reward fer them air galoots' capter," spoke up another.

"Yes," replied the first speaker, "five hundred dollars fer ther prisoner as was in ther jail, an' er hundred fer ther other chap."

This was one of the points that Red Robin had desired information upon. He now sprang from the horse's back and hitched the animal to a post that was in front of the hotel.

Then he ascended the steps and entered the building.

Simeon Small was in his usual place behind the bar, and there were a few loafers in the room.

In order to successfully carry out the character he had assumed, Red Robin advanced to the bar and called for liquor.

Small at once waited on the customer, and Red Robin tossed off the fiery stuff as though he was in the habit of taking his "bitters" daily.

In a conspicuous place upon one of the bar-room's walls was tacked a large placard, upon which was written, in a clear, plain hand:

"TAKE NOTICE!"

"\$500 Reward is offered for the recapture of the ruffian who calls himself Red Robin, but who is, in truth, Captain Mystery, the road-agent, and who recently escaped from the jail in this place. Also—

"\$100 Reward for the capture of the fellow known as Old Bombshell, who assisted the above-mentioned ruffian to escape. These two men are both outlaws, and the law-abiding citizens of this camp are requested to make every exertion for their apprehension. (Signed), CYRUS GAINES, Per order of the Vigilance Comm."

Red Robin's eyes caught sight of this notice, and walking over to where it was posted, he read it carefully, yet apparently with great trouble, seeming to spell out each word.

He turned carelessly away, and glancing through the wide-open doorway into the saloon and dance-room, to his surprise and pleasure, he saw Howard Thorne, sitting all alone at one of the deal-tables. There was no one else in the room. On Thorne's face there was a strangely mingled look of excitement and moody thoughtfulness.

Red Robin advanced to the young man's side, and slapping him heavily on the shoulder, exclaimed in a tone of voice loud enough to be heard in the bar-room:

"How are ye, young feller! Dog my cats ef you ain't jist ther chap I'm lookin' arter! Reckon you remember me?"

"Well, I can't say that I do," replied Thorne,

somewhat angrily, for the slap that Red Robin had delivered upon his shoulder had been far from gentle. "Who in Halifax are you, anyway?"

"Me? Why, you don't mean ter say that you don't remember me, an ole feller-traveler. Rode mor'n er hundred mile wi' yer. Why, I'm Boze-man Jake."

"Boze-man Jake?" interrogatively. "I don't—"

But a covert sign from Red Robin caused the young man to pause in his uncertain, hesitating speech, and as the disguised man sunk into a chair by the table, he whispered quickly:

"I am Red Robin—easy!"

Then he continued aloud:

"Et can't be thet you've fergot ole Jake. Why, don't ye know, we agreed ter meet hyar an' settle a little piece of business thet we war talkin' about?"

"To be sure I do!" exclaimed Thorne, comprehending the situation. "How queer that I should forget!"

Then they began conversing in lower tones.

"I didn't know you at first," said Howard. "Your disguise is complete."

"It must be, for it deceived even the sharp-eyed bartender out there. He looked at me rather sharply, but I fancy he failed to recognize me."

"But why are you thus disguised?"

"I suppose you have heard of the little fracas that occurred here last night?"

"I caught a few words that some of the roughs were saying about some kind of a blow-out; but did not heed them. Then there was a prisoner who escaped from the jail last night, and raised an infernal row in the camp."

"I was that prisoner."

"You?"

Howard Thorne was plainly astonished, and it was evident to Red Robin that the young man knew very little of the exciting occurrences of the previous night.

With a few hurried words, the Reckless told Thorne of the affair and of the reward offered by Cyrus Gaines for his capture. The young man was astonished and indignant.

"Well, what kind of a camp is this, anyway?" Howard exclaimed. "I believe there was more than one foul job done last night. Miss Blair is missing!"

"Missing?" exclaimed Red Robin. "Then Old Bombshell was right!"

"Yes, she is missing. She did not appear this morning, and after rapping several times, the servant tried the door. It was locked. Every attempt to arouse her was a failure, and finally they burst in her door, to find her bed tumbled, but the window open and the young lady gone."

"Then she was abducted! As we came out of the jail door, Old Bombshell and I saw two horsemen gallop by, one of whom carried across the saddle-bow what seemed to be a large bundle, but Bombshell declared that it looked like a woman. It may have been Miss Blair."

In a moment Howard Thorne became terribly excited.

"It is the first clew!" he cried. "They carried her away! She must be rescued!"

"Coolly, coolly, young man. Hang to your chair, and keep your clothes on. Old Bombshell and myself are ready to do our best for the young lady. As for me, I have a notion that it may be for my interests to take a look after these outlaws, whom I believe abducted Miss Blair. I have a plan. Listen:

"Old Bombshell is waiting for me a little way down Big Cat Canyon. If you wish to take a hand in this little affair, secure a good horse and join him there. Should we leave camp together, it might awaken suspicion. Arm yourself well, and tell no one where you are going. We three are enough; we want no more. I will join you presently, and in our future actions we will be guided by Old Bombshell."

The young man nodded his comprehension.

"Then away, at once!" said the Reckless.

Thorne at once departed, leaving Red Robin still sitting beside the deal-table, gazing thoughtfully at the floor.

He paid no attention to two rough-looking men who came into the room and sat down near at hand, but continued in his thoughtful attitude.

Silently a little side-door opened, and Faro Kate, the Masked Queen, appeared. She advanced noiselessly into the room until she stood near Red Robin. Then she spoke:

"Well, sir, why are you here?"

He arose to his feet, but before he could reply she seized his coat, and tearing it open, revealed the red vest beneath.

"Red Robin!" she cried sharply, springing back a step. "Die!" Thrusting a revolver almost against his red breast, she fired!

CHAPTER VIII.

IN THE OUTLAWS' CAMP.

WHEN Sylva Blair again became conscious, she found herself in an unfamiliar place.

She was lying upon a bed in a small room, and close by the bedside was a small window, through which she could catch a glimpse of one or two log cabins, with steep, perpendicular bluffs and tall mountain peaks in the background.

A single glance showed her that the room in which she was lying was neat and cozy, everything being neatly and tastefully arranged, plainly showing the touches of a woman's hand. The rough walls of the room were completely hidden by dark, grayish curtains; upon the floor was a carpet, and neat white curtains were looped back from the windows. The furniture of the room was stained a dark walnut color.

Upon a small center-table were a few books and a guitar. Against one of the walls hung some book-shelves well-filled with books, and upon the walls were several oil-paintings. Near a window sat an easel, upon which was a half-finished picture.

Sylva was alone in the room. She gazed around her in astonishment. Where was she? What had happened?

She pressed her hand to her bewildered head, striving to collect her scattered senses. Finally everything came back to her—the road-agent's attack upon the stage—her father's failure to meet her at Boulder Bar—the horrible dream and still more horrible awakening. After that all was a blank, for she could remember nothing.

She realized that she must have been chloroformed, kidnapped and brought to the place where she now was. But for what reason?

She remembered the ominous, half-hesitating words of Howard just before the road-agent's attack upon the stage. Could it be that, as he feared, there was indeed something wrong about her father's desire for her to come to Boulder Bar? Could it be? And what would become of her now? She was undoubtedly in villainous hands, far from friends and aid. She could not hope to be rescued, unless—unless—

The door softly opened, and a rare vision of beauty entered. A young girl, of perhaps seventeen or eighteen years, came quietly into the room. She was clothed in a handsome short dress of some costly material. A few jewels flashed upon her person. But the face was one to catch the eye of the spectator and hold him entranced. Her complexion was indescribable by any of the terms "soft," "creamy," "peach-like," etc., so commonly used. It was simply exquisite! The sweet red lips of her small mouth were enough to tempt any man to rashness. In fact, every feature of her face was perfect. She appeared gentle and lovable, yet there was something shining in those black eyes which told that she could hate as well as love.

Sylva uttered a little cry of surprise as she beheld this beautiful stranger. The captive girl's surroundings had told her that a lady of refinement at least dwelt there, but she had little expected to meet such a beautiful person as she now beheld.

The stranger uttered a little cry of surprise and pleasure as she beheld Sylva.

"Oh, so you have awakened!" she cried. "I am so glad!"

She advanced quickly to Sylva's side, her face expressing her pleasure at seeing the captive had recovered from the effects of the drug.

"Where am I?" cried Sylva, in a dazed manner, sitting up on the bed. "Who are you?"

"Now don't be alarmed, dear friend," said the girl, "for, I assure you, you are in no danger. My name is Inez, and I am your friend. I am sometimes called Wild Inez by the men."

"The men—what men? Oh, tell me! Where am I—where am I?"

After a moment's hesitation, Wild Inez spoke swiftly, firmly, yet with a tender light of sympathy in her dark eyes.

"You are in an outlaw's retreat—that of him known as Captain Mystery. But do not be alarmed, for, I repeat, you are in no danger—you will not be harmed. I have Captain Mystery's word for that, and he never breaks his word with me."

But Sylva sunk back with a cry of despair, helplessly wringing her hands. It was no more

than she had expected, yet the blow fell no less hard for that.

There was a look of tender sympathy upon Inez's face as she knelt beside the bed, trying to comfort the unhappy girl. But Sylva, scarcely heeding her, only wrung her hands, and sobbed:

"Oh, father! father! where are you? Where are you?"

It was nearly an hour before she became quiet, and during that time, Inez remained by her side, doing her best to comfort her.

Finally Sylva turned to her, and said:

"Even though I find you here among outlaws, your face tells me that you are not bad. You have said that you are my friend, and I more than half believe your words. But tell me, why was I brought here?"

"I can tell you all that I know, in a few words," was the reply. "Captain Mystery caused you to be taken prisoner and brought to this place. He sent a note to me, commending you to my care. He said that in days gone by, your father cheated him out of ten thousand dollars, and declared that he should hold you prisoner until Henry Blair paid every cent of that money, with interest. You will then be released."

"My father—do you know aught of him?"

"No, nothing, only what I have learned from the captain. But don't you want food? You must be hungry."

"No, I want nothing now. I must think."

She again lay down upon the bed and turned her face toward the wall. She could catch an occasional glimpse of some of the outlaws as they passed the window; but she paid no attention to them, only lay there thinking—thinking.

Wild Inez sat by the bedside, quietly watching her, never speaking or attempting to arouse her from the reverie into which she had fallen.

Finally Sylva turned to the strange girl.

"What time is it?" she asked. "How long was I unconscious?"

"It is late in the morning. You partially aroused when you were first brought here, and were at once given something to make you sleep."

"But how came you here?" asked Sylva, wonderingly. "Surely you have nothing in common with these outlaws? You are far above such creatures as they."

A soft blush stole over Wild Inez's face.

"I am here—well, I can't—I can't explain!" she stammered.

"Ah, I see. Your lover should be somewhere else. This is hardly the place for him among these outlaws."

"Where he goes, there will I follow, if it is to death!" cried Inez.

"I admire your loyalty, but am sorry that he should lead you here. Who are you, in truth?"

"I do not know," was the sad reply. "Until my fifteenth year I lived with a man named De Lorm. I supposed that I was his daughter, and was treated as such; but upon his death-bed he told me that he had taken me from an almshouse in Philadelphia, and that he had not the slightest knowledge of who my parents were. He was a business man, but died insolvent, and thus I was turned out upon the world, a homeless wanderer. My wanderings have brought me here."

"And your lover—"

"Is Captain Mystery?"

Sylva shrunk back in surprise.

"No! no! Not that monster—not the outlaw chief! It cannot be!"

"He is no monster," replied Inez, spiritedly.

"True, he is an outlaw; but how came he such? His bitter enemies, whom he never wronged in the least, but who are determined to hound him down to ruin and death, drove him to what he is. He would be an honest man, and live as others do if they would let him alone."

"Who are his enemies?"

"I do not know. In fact, I know nothing about it only what his lips have told me."

"He may have deceived you," said Sylva, and she regretted the words the moment she had spoken them.

A strange, burning light flashed into Wild Inez's eyes, and she cried sharply:

"Silence! Do not dare to speak thus of him!"

Then, as she saw Sylva shrink from her, her whole manner changed, and holding out one slender white hand, she said, softly: "Forgive me! forgive me! I spoke too sharply. It was wrong for me to do so, but your words—"

"I should not have spoken them." And Sylva took the outstretched hand. "Forget that I was unkind enough to do so. You said that you were my friend, and I feel that you are. I will be careful hereafter, and not say rude things."

The two girls clasped hands warmly, and from that moment they became firm friends.

"Do you see Captain Mystery often?" asked Sylva.

"No, not often. He is away the greater part of the time. He seldom remains here more than a few hours at a time."

"How does he look—is he handsome?" with womanly curiosity.

"I don't know," was the reply. "I never saw his face!"

For a moment Sylva was speechless with astonishment. She could scarcely comprehend the meaning of the strange girl's words. In love with a man whose face she never saw! Ridiculous! Finally she stammered out:

"What—never saw his face! What do you mean?"

Inez uttered a merry little laugh.

"Just what I said—I have never seen Captain Mystery's face. Yet I know full well how he looks. I have pictured his face in my mind a hundred times—gay, handsome, and dashing! Romantic, isn't it?"

Sylva could not join her companion's laugh, although she tried for appearance's sake. She at once realized the terrible error that the girl had fallen into. Wildly infatuated with the outlaw, whose face she never saw, having pictured him in her mind as being a handsome, dashing hero, Inez would listen to no word against him. Sylva realized that it would be useless to reason with her, at that time, at least.

Sylva now arose, with a little of her newfound friend's assistance, for she was still weak, and her head felt strange.

Inez soon brought her some food, of which she partook sparingly. However, she felt better when she had eaten.

As soon as she was strong enough, Sylva walked to the door of the cabin and looked out. She saw that the outlaws' camp was situated in a deep "sink," or "basin," surrounded on all sides by almost, if not quite, perpendicular bluffs, or precipices, making it almost an impossibility for any one to enter the camp, save by the tunnel which ran directly through the mountain, as Inez informed her. This passage was carefully guarded at both ends.

There were six of the outlaws' cabins, and two large buildings which served as stables for the horses when it became necessary to put them under cover. They were now turned loose in the basin.

Some of the outlaws were moving about; others were sitting in small groups near some of the cabins, talking, laughing, smoking and playing cards.

Sylva looked upon the strange scene for a few moments, then turned back into the cabin.

"Inez," she said, quietly, "I must escape from here."

But the girl shook her head.

"It is impossible," she declared.

"But I must do it," persisted Sylva. "I fear something has happened to father, for he failed to meet me upon my arrival at Boulder Bar," and she told Inez her story, which the reader already knows.

She said nothing more to Inez about escaping, for she saw that the girl considered such a thing impossible. Nevertheless, she made up her mind to make an attempt to escape, and that at the first opportunity.

The day dragged by slowly enough to Sylva, although Inez did her best to amuse the captive girl. She showed Sylva the really meritorious pictures she had painted, and the books, which she said Captain Mystery had secured for her. She sung, and played upon her guitar, and Sylva declared that she had never heard a sweeter voice.

It was late in the afternoon when Sylva again went to the cabin door and looked out upon the outlaws' camp. She lifted her eyes to the tall mountain-peaks which were flooded with golden light. As she did so, she caught a glimpse of what seemed to be a familiar-looking figure that made a quick signal, then disappeared. She caught but a momentary glimpse of the form, but that was enough to cause a wild hope to leap up in her breast. However, she calmly turned back into the cabin, not mentioning what she had seen to Inez.

Night came at last.

Inez lighted a lamp and drew the curtains. Barely had she done so when the door opened, and Captain Mystery stepped into the room!

CHAPTER IX.

SEARCHING FOR SYLVA.

WITH a hoarse cry, Red Robin staggered back, as Faro Kate fired that shot straight at his red

breast. But he did not fall, although for a moment he seemed hard hit.

Whipping out their knives, the two rough-looking men, who had been sitting near, sprung toward him.

Before Faro Kate could repeat the treacherous shot, the three men were engaged in deadly encounter, for Red Robin had drawn a knife and turned to meet his assailants.

For a moment it seemed that he must be quickly overcome and slain, but only for a moment; then one of the two rough men dropped his knife, and clasp one hand to his breast, which was already showing crimson, reeled back and sunk down to the floor.

The other ruffian attacked Red Robin with redoubled fury.

At the sound of the sudden shot, the loafers in the bar-room had rushed into the saloon, and they now stood around, some of them with weapons drawn, excited witnesses of the terrible knife-duel.

In regard to size and weight, the men seemed well matched, but there was a certain quickness and alertness about the movements of Red Robin that was wanting in his adversary.

Round and round the two men circled, each warily watching for an opportunity to deal the other a fatal blow.

Revolver still in hand, Faro Kate breathlessly and anxiously watched the contest. She dared not attempt to shoot Red Robin for fear of hitting the other man.

But suddenly the combat came to an abrupt termination. For a moment the men fought savagely, then there came a cry of pain, and Red Robin's assailant fell to the floor.

Almost before the spectators could realize that the fight was ended, the sharp crack! crack! of Red Robin's revolvers rung out, for he had drawn his weapons and was charging the crowd.

Right and left they scattered before the wild, fierce-looking man, whose eyes seemed lit with a fiery glare, and whose revolvers vomited forth smoke and a leaden hail.

"Stop him!" shrieked Faro Kate, recklessly firing a shot at the bounding form of the red-breasted man. "Stop him! Take him, dead or alive!"

But before the crowd could recover from their alarm, the Reckless had bounded through their midst and disappeared into the bar-room. He came face to face with Simeon Small, who was just rushing toward the saloon, revolver in hand. But before the barkeeper could lift his weapon, Red Robin's fist struck him fairly between the eyes, and the unfortunate man went over backward, landing upon his head and shoulders, fairly knocked senseless.

Tearing open the door, the Reckless sprung out, bounding down the steps, a knife gleaming in one hand. One quick slash severed the rope with which the horse was hitched, and hurling himself upon the animal's back, he bent low in the saddle, to avoid the bullets that some of the men on the hotel-steps sent flying after him.

He laughed in a hard, reckless manner, as he dashed through the camp and on toward the place where he had parted with Old Bombshell.

"The cat shows her claws!" he muttered, savagely. "She tried hard to kill me, and was prepared, if she failed, to have her ruffians close in and finish the job. I am convinced that this masked woman knows me, and for personal reasons seeks my life."

He dashed on down Big Cat Canyon, and soon came upon Old Bombshell and Howard Thorne, who were earnestly talking together.

They heard him as he came galloping down toward them, and as he came up, Old Bombshell cried:

"By the Roman gods, pard! I war jist ergoin' ter strike out ter see w'ot ther racket war. Heerd ther shots jist now, ye see, an' kinder thort p'r'aps ye had run erg'in' er deefekilty. This young feller war jist er-tellin' me ye'd sent him heer ter meet me. But w'ot did ther shoot-in' mean?"

"Oh, they were only using me for a target for a little revolver-practice," replied the Reckless, with a hard laugh.

"Thunder an' Mars! you don't remark! W'ot in blazes war ther blow-out?"

With a few brief words, Red Robin related what had occurred since he had parted with Thorne.

"Ghost o' ther Pan Handle! et war er reg'lar cirkiss, warn't et! Ther blamed galoots meant ter salivate ye thet time fer keeps! Reckon they realize their mistake in buckin' erg'in' er Lisbon yarthquake. Bet er bob-tailed boss they'll tackle ye with er small-sized army next time they try ter send ye over ther range. But

I say, pard, didn't they hit ye with sum o' ther lead w'ot they slung at yer karkiss?"

The Reckless smiled in a peculiar manner.

"Hit me?—to be sure they did. But their bullets failed to harm me. I am here!"

Old Bombshell looked puzzled, as also did Howard Thorne.

"Ef they hit ye, whar are yer wounds?" asked Bombshell.

"I have none," was the reply. "As I told you, I am unharmed. Both bullet and steel failed them in their attack upon my life."

Old Bombshell slowly shook his head, as though he did not fully understand, but made no further remark.

The three men now turned their horses' heads down the canyon, and as they rode along, Red Robin rapidly explained to Old Bombshell concerning Sylva Blair and her probable abduction by the outlaws.

"By ther Roman gods, pard! I believe that et war she as we see'd them fellers kerryin' orf as we kem out o' ther jail!" declared Bombshell.

"Undoubtedly you are right," replied the Reckless. "They were probably two of Captain Mystery's men who did the foul job. If so, she was carried to the outlaws' nest, and there we shall find her, if she is found at all."

"An' thar' whar ye propose ter go?"

"Yes, if we can find their retreat."

"Waal, pard, I reckon I know pritty durned near whar their hang-out is. Kinder guess thet me an' ole Lion kin smell 'em out. But, I say, mate, are you a-goin' ter take this heer young chap erlong?"

"Yes—why not?"

Old Bombshell shook his head soberly.

"We may git inter sum all-durned ternal tuff places, mate, an' we want nobuddy with us as ain't fitted out with cast-iron narves an' charged with clean number one grit. 'Tain't every galoot as would cnoose ter poke his nose inter sum o' ther corners whar we may go—ghosts o' ther Pan Handle, no!"

Howard Thorne spoke quietly but decidedly:

"If you do not wish me to go with you, sir, we will part company; but whether we do this or not, I am going on in search for Miss Blair. I do not desire to force my company upon any one."

"Thet's all well ernuff," grunted Bombshell, grimly. "But I'd advise ye ter face erbout an' climb back inter camp. By ther Roman gods, young feller! if ye continer in ther company of we two Lisbon yarthquakes, ye may get er taste ov cold lead, fer we are goin' inter ther wolf-den ov Ole Mystery hisself."

"I care not if you go to the very mouth of Hades!" cried Thorne, warmly. "If I am with you you will see no quailing or flinching on my part. But if you wish that we separate—"

Here Red Robin spoke up.

"I fancy, Bombshell, that you will find this young man pure number one grit. Had I not thought so, I should not have said anything to him of this expedition."

"Waal, pard, I ain't ergoin' ter kick ef you think et best ter take ther young chap erlong. I hed an idee as how he might be er leetle gone on ther gal, an' jist es like es not he'd get narvous an' make er durned mess jist w'en things war mighty kinder critical. But ef you say take him, take him she am."

"Then that settles it," laughed Red Robin. "I'll bet my money on our friend here. But—"

For reply the young man showed him two heavy self-cocking revolvers.

"I fancy those will do," said the Reckless, as soon as he saw them. "They are tools that you can work rapidly, and the man who runs against a ball from one of them will know it."

For a few moments the trio rode on in silence. Finally Red Robin turned to Old Bombshell, saying:

"Well, partner, what are your plans?"

"Waal, they are short ernuff, an' I kinder reckon as how there ain't enuff twist in 'em ter bother your head much. First, we will go to my hang-out, fer I want ter get my rifle. I can fit you fellers out with rifles if ye want 'em. Arter that we will leave toward ther section o' ther kentry whar I hev an idee this blamed outlaw hangs out. Ef we find ther den, why then we can lay out future actions."

"Plain enough, although I fancy we shall have no little difficulty in finding Captain Mystery's retreat."

Old Bombshell made no reply, and they rode on in silence until they had traversed the narrow ravine and entered the mountain pocket where stood the Boomerang's cabin.

Bombshell dismounted and entered the cabin,

returning in a few moments with three rifles. Passing Red Robin and Thorne each a rifle, he retained one himself.

There were also several other things which he secured before announcing:

"Thar, I reckon we are pretty nigh reddey fer Ole Mystery, an' by ther Roman gods, we'll give him sum lively music ef we run afoul ov him!"

Then he sprung lightly upon his horse's back and led the way out of the pocket, away into the hills.

It would be wearisome to follow every movement of the trio in their search for the outlaws' stronghold; but more by good luck than from any other reason, late in the afternoon the three found themselves gazing down from a mountain-side into the very sink where stood the cabins of the outlaws.

"Thar," exclaimed Old Bombshell, "by ther Roman gods, pards! thar she is—ther very camp whar Ole Mystery an' his outlaw gang holds out. I'll chaw up my ole boots ef we ain't in luck!"

"I should say we were," Red Robin replied, "for our finding this place is evidently nothing more than a piece of pure luck. A man might tramp around over this part of the country for half a dozen years, and still never come across this camp."

"Right you are, Robin," declared the Border Boomerang. "But, I say, mates, we'd better be gittin' under kiver, ur them blamed varlets down thar may sight us."

When they had concealed themselves Bombshell again spoke:

"Now you fellers stay heer while I slide back to where we left ther hosses an' see as how they are all right. Jist lay close an' keep cool till I kem back."

With these words he departed.

Red Robin and Thorne lay beside two large boulders, both gazing down into the camp.

"Do you think we shall find Miss Blair down there?" asked Howard.

"I do," replied his companion. "Something seems to tell me that we shall find her there."

"I hope so, indeed, for, to plainly acknowledge the truth, I have taken more than a passing fancy to that girl."

"I knew it. Your actions told me that. As for me, I have an idea that I may advance my own interests by going down there. I more than half believe that my bitterest enemy is in some way connected with those outlaws."

"But how do the outlaws enter this hole? There seems to be no passable opening."

"So I observe. There must be some passage. Perhaps it is a cave-tunnel through the very base of some of these hills. Ah! there it is now!" pointing across the sink to the opening of the passage, which was visible upon the opposite side.

"Yes, I see it now. There is a guard near by the mouth. It is probably guarded at both ends. I wonder how Old Bombshell proposes to enter the sink?"

"By means of a rope, I think? We can lower ourselves down into the very midst of their camp without disturbing an outlaw."

In a few moments Bombshell returned, and with him he brought a long, knotted rope, proving that Red Robin's idea of the manner in which he intended to enter the sink was a true one.

He explained that as soon as it was dark, they would descend the mountain to the brink of the precipice. There they would make one end of the rope fast, letting the other drop over into the sink. They could then descend into the very midst of the outlaws' camp.

While the three men were gazing down at the outlaws' camp, they saw one of the cabin-doors open and a female appear in the doorway. She turned her face upward toward the mountain-peaks, and despite the distance, Red Robin and Thorne at once recognized her as Sylva Blair.

Uttering a low cry, Howard sprung into view, waving his hand to the girl below. With an angry curse Old Bombshell seized the young man by the shoulder and jerked him off his feet, landing him flat on his back, behind a boulder.

"Jess ez I tole ye, pard!" snorted the Border Boomerang. "I knew he'd do et! By ther Roman gods! I'd durned good min' ter shake ther breath out o' ther young fool's body!"

But he didn't have a chance, for at this moment Howard twisted himself out of his coat and sprung up, leaving the garment in Old Bombshell's hands.

"You may shake the coat, old man," said Thorne, coolly, "but I seriously object to your shaking me. If I did anything wrong, I beg

forgiveness, and promise to guard my actions more closely in the future."

But Old Bombshell only growled out an unintelligible reply, as he tossed the young man his coat.

The three men again resumed their watchful attitude, and until the sun set and the darkness came on, they lay there upon the mountain-side, watching and conversing.

Finally Old Bombshell arose to his feet and announced himself ready to descend into the outlaws' camp.

CHAPTER X.

A JEALOUS GIRL.

BOTH of the girls uttered a little cry as the masked outlaw stepped into the room. Sylva shrunk back in surprise and fear, but Inez sprang forward with outstretched hands, and was caught in the outlaw's arms.

He did not kiss her, for he could not do so without removing his mask, a thing which it was said he never did in the outlaw camp. To his own men, as well as to those who were not his followers, he was indeed a mystery.

When he first organized his band, he had but three followers, but gradually others sought admission, and many were taken in, until Captain Mystery's outlaws became a large and powerful gang, fairly terrorizing the part of the country in the vicinity of their stronghold.

Many times had parties organized in Boulder Bar set out to search for the outlaws' retreat, but they always failed in finding it. Many claimed that their ill-success was due to the fact that many of Captain Mystery's followers dwelt in Boulder Bar, and that such ones always formed a part of every expedition that set out to search for the outlaws.

There was a price upon Captain Mystery's head, but no one had thus far been lucky enough to secure it. He still carried on his depredations, and laughed at his foes.

He was not a large man; on the contrary, he was rather below medium height, and of slender build. His dress from head to foot was of dark, rich cloth, his face being covered with a black mask. His clothing was covered with bright silver buttons, and around his waist was a belt of silver links, into which were thrust two handsome revolvers. Around his dark hat was a fine silver chain, the ends hanging down over the brim, with two tiny gold bells attached, in the stead of tassels.

His costume was showy, fitting his elegant form to perfection, and one would have been led to think that the face beneath the mask was a handsome one.

The strange girl, Wild Inez, was of that peculiar romantic temperament who see more to admire in a "robber knight," even though his hands are stained with blood, than in the common every-day heroes of life.

She sprang into his arms and lay there, her dark, handsome eyes upturned to his, a love-light gleaming in their liquid depths. And all unmindful of Sylva's watchful eyes, he pressed her to his breast, and murmured loving words in her ear.

But suddenly Captain Mystery caught sight of the spectator, and gently disengaging Inez's clinging arms, he turned to Sylva, gracefully doffing his hat and bowing low.

"Ah! I beg pardon, lady! I did not see you before."

There was something strangely familiar in those hoarse tones, although the outlaw evidently endeavored to disguise his voice. It seemed to Sylva that she had heard that voice before, but when or where she could not tell.

She did not reply, but sat gazing at him, as if there was something about him that had a sort of subtle fascination for her.

"This is Captain Mystery, Sylva," said Inez, turning to the captive girl.

"My captor!" cried Sylva, a touch of scorn in her voice.

The outlaw made a quick gesture of denial with one gloved hand.

"No, no—not that! Your host, instead. Consider yourself an honored guest. I assure you I look upon you as such."

"A guest has the privilege of going and coming at pleasure. The movements of a guest are not restricted."

"And yours are not, as long as you do not attempt to leave this mountain-camp. You are at liberty to go where you please, as long as you do not attempt to enter the passage which leads from this snug little retreat."

Sylva laughed sarcastically, her courage rising.

"How kind!" she cried, in scorn. "My actions are not restricted, and yet they are! I am a guest, and yet a prisoner! A strange paradox, indeed!"

For a moment the outlaw made no reply, but stood gazing thoughtfully at her. Finally, advancing a few steps, he spoke:

"Again, I declare you are here more as a guest than as a prisoner. Circumstances compelled me to have you brought here, but I swear that you shall not be harmed. Have no fear of my men, for they know me, and will not dare insult or offend you in any manner. If possible, consider me a friend."

"Such a thing is not possible. You are an outlaw! At your instigation, I was drugged and brought here. Would a friend cause such a vile deed to be done? Sir, you had better release me at once, and allow me to return to the mining-camp. If you do so, I may then consider you a friend. My father—"

"Henry Blair knows where you are—I swear it! It is in his power, even, to cause your release."

"Yes I know the false story you concocted of my father cheating you out of a sum of money. I do not believe it! It is a falsehood invented to justify your action in taking me prisoner and holding me until you wrung a large ransom from my father. You have probably told him that I was in your power, and that you would release me when he handed over the sum you demanded."

"Have it as you like. I shall not contradict your statements, however wild you may shoot."

"You cannot deny it. You would, were my words untrue."

Captain Mystery laughed. He seemed in no way angered or offended; instead, he appeared pleased by the spirit shown by the girl.

"Even should I deny the accusation, you would not believe my words now. Let it drop. You will yet find that I spoke the truth. But you should be contented here. I am sure your surroundings are not unpleasant. Inez's skillful hands have made what was a rather rough looking hut into an attractive cottage. You will find her a most lovable little woman, and your companionship should be agreeable. She is—"

"There, there," cried Inez, laughing merrily. "No more flattery, sir! I will not stand it. Miss Sylva will find out all about me, and she can form her opinion unassisted."

"She can form nothing but a favorable one. You girls should become great friends. Should Miss Blair's captivity be protracted, you must do your best to amuse her, Inez. Should Henry Blair come to terms at once, of course Miss Blair will be released, and it is probable that your acquaintance will end at that time."

After conversing with Inez for a few minutes, Captain Mystery left the cabin.

He made his way directly to one of the small cabins that, when occasion required, served as a sort of jail to safely hold such prisoners as the outlaw chief saw fit to confine there.

He undid the fastenings of the door, which were upon the outside, and entered, striking a match as soon as he passed through the doorway. He soon found a candle and lighted it.

The dim light showed a human figure stretched at full length upon the floor, and as Captain Mystery approached this figure, candle in hand, it became apparent that it was a man, who was bound hand and foot.

The outlaw chief set the candle upon the floor and stood over the prisoner, gazing silently at him. Finally he spoke:

"You are doomed to die, Fred Hawkes."

Despite his bonds, the man stirred uneasily.

"I feared that warther way it would be," he said, huskily.

"You could expect nothing else, you traitorous dog!" cried Captain Mystery.

"I am no traitor," was the dogged reply. "The man that says so lies!"

"I say so."

"Then you lie, Captain."

For a moment it seemed that Captain Mystery would spring upon the helpless man. His fingers opened and closed nervously, and his whole frame seemed to shake with anger.

"Have a care!" hissed the outlaw-chief. "Tie up that cursed tongue of yours, or I will throttle you on the spot!"

Hawkes laughed recklessly.

"Throttle away, Cap. I hev got ter die anyhow, an' er few hours will make little difference."

Captain Mystery folded his arms, and for a long time stood silently thinking.

"I have positive proof of your guilt, Hawkes," he finally said. "You may as well confess."

"Confess nuthin'" determinedly. "I ain't er goin' ter confess a lie for no man. Captain, I'm here, flat on my back, your prisoner, accused of bein' er traitor, but by the heavens above us, I solemnly swear I am no traitor!"

"You cannot make me believe that," firmly replied the outlaw-chief. "The evidence against you is too great. Hawkes, you are in for it, and no amount of false swearing will save you."

"What's yer proof ag'in' me?" cried the prisoner.

"What do yer know for solid facts that you can bring ag'in' me?"

"I know much—enough to condemn you twice. You sought to sell us to some of the Sunday-honest men of Boulder Bar. Your plans were more than half-formed. You would have led them here, and as you know all the signals and pass-words, you could easily deceive the guards, until it was too late for them to realize their mistake. Thus you could lead a party through the passage into this very camp, and slaughter us every one, almost before we knew danger menaced us. Oh, your devilish plans are all known, and you may as well confess."

"It's all er lie!" cried the prisoner. "Thar ain't er word ov truth in it!"

With a great effort, Captain Mystery whipped out a knife, and leaping upon the prisoner, thrust the point against the man's throat.

"Confess, curse you!" he grated. "Tell the truth, or by the Lord Harry it will be the worse for you!"

The man turned very white, and seemed to shrink away from the menacing knife, but he managed to gasp out:

"Nothin' ter confess—not a durned word!"

The point of the knife was pressed through the skin of Fred Hawkes's throat till it was tipped with blood, and for a moment, it seemed that the outlaw chief would thrust the blade in to the hilt. There was a burning, deadly gleam in the outlaw's eyes,

which could be seen through the holes in the mask, and for a brief space of time, the helpless man's life hung by a thread, as it were.

Then, with a harsh laugh, Captain Mystery arose to his feet, replacing the knife in its sheath.

"You die in the morning, you traitor dog!"

With these fierce words, the outlaw chief left the prison hut, closing and fastening the door behind him.

He made his way back to the cabin where Inez and Sylva were. Entering, he found Sylva alone.

He quietly seated himself in a chair, saying quickly, as he saw the girl about to arise:

"Don't be alarmed, Miss Blair. I assure you that you are in no danger of insult or harm from me. I wish to see you alone a few minutes, for I desire a little private talk with you."

Sylva sunk back into the chair, a wondering look in her eyes. Again it seemed to her that there was something strangely familiar about the outlaw chief's voice.

Captain Mystery continued:

"It is possible, Miss Blair, that the true reason why I brought you here is not known to any but myself. Had you and I met back in Boulder Bar, where I wear no mask, a revelation might have taken place that would have been unpleasant—for me. Therefore, I caused your abduction and had you brought here. The attack upon the stage in which you were journeying was at my instigation and was for the purpose of taking you prisoner."

"And you have the impudence to tell me this!" cried Sylva, her pretty face flushing with anger. "For shame! Do you usually obtain your ill-gotten plunder by kidnapping unprotected young ladies and holding them for ransom?"

The outlaw made a careless, imploring gesture with one gloved hand, at the same time laughing lightly, as though pleased.

"If you only knew what a pretty picture you made in your indignation, your eyes aglow, your cheeks suffused—but you don't know. One look is enough to set the blood dancing through any man's veins. I half-believe I am falling in love with you, Sylva!"

She sprang to her feet, indignation and fear plainly showing on her face.

Captain Mystery also arose.

"Now don't be alarmed!" he said quickly, his voice again sounding familiar to Sylva. "I more than half-believe I am in love with you—I know I am! When you were very small, a tiny, wee thing, you had your mother's face—your mother, whom I once madly loved—yet I hated you! But as you grew older, my hatred gradually turned to love, until to-day I am as madly infatuated with you as I once was with your proud, beautiful mother."

He advanced toward her, but she shrunk from him in horror. He held out his hands pleadingly to her.

At this moment the door of the back-room opened, and Inez entered the room. As her eyes fell upon the strange tableau, she started back, showing her white even teeth and clinching one small hand.

Captain Mystery saw her, and quickly turning away from Sylva, he said:

"Inez, I wish to speak with you in private—just a few words."

He moved quickly forward and pushed her through the doorway into the back-room, following himself, and carefully closing the door behind them. Then he turned to the girl, to find her dark eyes fairly blazing with an angry light.

"Inez," he said, softly, seeking to embrace her; but she shrunk from him, hoarsely crying:

"Explain!—don't touch me!—explain!"

For a moment he held his hands outstretched to her, then he dropped them by his sides. When he spoke, his voice sounded much different than it had while conversing with Sylva; it was soft and low, almost sad.

"Do you doubt me? It cannot be that you do, and yet—"

"Explain what I saw—can you? That is all I ask. Do that and—"

"Easily done, little one. A few straight words and you will understand it all. I can easily explain it to your entire satisfaction."

"If you—can—do that— Only just say you were not making love to her! Say that! I will believe you."

"But you see I was, little one!"

"And you dare tell me this—you, who have a hundred times held me in your arms and told me your love, swearing to be true to me! Just God! do you dare?"

Her hands were clinched, her eyes glowing like burning coals, while her whole frame trembled with emotion.

"Inez! Inez! for heaven's sake, be quiet! I am still true to you! Hear me—I repeat it, I am still true to you! If you will listen, I will explain."

"Go on, I am listening."

By a great effort the girl had, for the time, conquered her emotions, and her voice was calm and even as she spoke.

"I acknowledge that I was making love to Sylva Blair, but it was for a purpose," Captain Blair began. "Her father is wealthy, yet he may refuse to come to my terms about ponying over the shining sheekles which I demand as ransom-money for his daughter. He may even attempt to wrest her from my hands by force. If he does this, some powerful influence must be brought to bear on him at once. If I could induce this girl to fall in love with me, I would have her write a letter to her father stating that such was the case. With this letter I would inclose a note, stating that if the ransom money was not paid in ten days, Miss Sylva Blair would become

"Mrs. Captain Mystery. I fancy that would bring the old gent to terms at once."

Despite her suspicions and wild, jealous anger, Inaz was easily deceived.

Hesitatingly she asked:

"Is—is this true?"

"Every wor.—true as gospel!" the outlaw chief declared. "I love you too dearly, truly to fall in love with another. Darling, you are my light, my life!"

With a little hysterical cry of joy she threw herself into his arms, sobbing out:

"Forgive me—forgive me! I must have been crazy! I hardly knew what I did. How foolish of me to think that you would love another! I am ashamed of myself!"

He pressed her to his bosom, in which beat one of the blackest and vilest of human hearts, softly murmuring:

"Ah, my little love, how sweet it is to be once more alone with you! Are you happy now?"

"Yes, yes; so happy, for I know that your love is wholly mine! But if it had been true that you loved Sylvia Blair—"

"What then?"

"I know I would have killed you!"

CHAPTER XI.

AN ATTEMPTED RESCUE.

WHEN the outlaw chief had closed the door behind him, leaving her alone, Sylvia Blair sunk down in a chair, covering her pale face with her trembling hands.

"Heaven help me!" she moaned. "I am in great danger now. This dreadful outlaw loves me! And such love as his must be—vile, polluting! Death is to be preferred a thousand times! Heavenly Father, is there no way of escaping from his foul clutches?"

A shudder of horror shook her slender frame. Suddenly she started to her feet, gasping in low tones, as though she feared some one would hear her:

"I must escape! I will try to get away from here. It were a thousand times better to starve and perish among the mountains than to remain while he is here. I must escape!"

She started hesitatingly and tremblingly toward the door, when, lo! it softly opened, and Howard Thorne appeared!

Sylvia started back in surprise, a low cry breaking from her lips; then she sprang forward, sobbing out:

"Oh, you have come to save me! I am so glad—so glad!"

He caught her in his arms, whispering hastily:

"Softly, Sylvia, softly! You may be heard. I have come to save you and will do so if it is in my power. Come, we must get away from here."

He drew her out into the darkness, quietly closing the cabin door.

"Oh, how came you here?" she asked. "It seems too good to be true!"

"I came with friends. We were on the mountain-side when you came to the cabin door this afternoon. I waved my hand to you."

"Yes, yes! I saw you then and thought you looked familiar. But where are your friends?"

"I do not know. They dropped into this sink by the means of a rope, that hangs over a cliff at the eastern side of this hole, leaving me behind, probably thinking that I was not to be trusted. But I could not remain up there while I knew you were down here in danger, perhaps. So as soon as my friends were down the rope, and had had sufficient time to move away, I swung myself over the precipice and came down. I remembered the cabin where I had seen you in the doorway, and came here at once. I was near at hand when that outlaw entered."

"He was Captain Mystery."

"So I thought, for I listened at the door and overheard a part of his love-making. I judged that he had left the room, when I made bold to open the door."

"It was well that he had, for he appears like a desperate man, and would probably have taken your life, had he seen you."

"Well, if he had, it would have been necessary for him to have done some mighty lively shooting, for I had my hand on a revolver when I opened the door. I was prepared to lay him out, if called upon to do so."

Thorne spoke quietly and decidedly. He had come prepared to shoot if it were necessary, and he meant to do so promptly should occasion require.

"But, come, Miss Blair, we must escape from this place. I think we shall have no trouble in doing so, for the outlaws seem very quiet on this side of the camp. There are some fellows over at the other side who are having a jubilee, judging by the noise they make."

From a cabin at the other side of the sink issued sounds of boisterous merriment. The cabin-door was open and their rude songs and loud laughter could be plainly heard.

Howard and Sylvia glided along toward the place where the rope was hanging over the cliff, keeping close to the outlaws' buildings so as to dodge around a corner should such an action become necessary.

They were near the jail when they saw two dark forms come out of the jail-door and glide swiftly away in the darkness.

Howard muttered an exclamation of vexation when they had disappeared.

"Hang it! That is what I call an unluckystreak of luck!"

"Why, what is the trouble? What do you mean?" asked Sylvia.

"Why, those fellows have gone straight toward the place where the rope hangs over the precipice.

If they discover it it is all up with us. Our escape will be cut off, and we shall be caught like rats in a trap."

Sylvia uttered a little cry.

"Let's hurry! Let's get there before they do. Can't we do it and escape?"

"No, it is impossible. We would be discovered, and that would be the worst thing that could happen."

"But what can we do? How can we escape?"

"We can do nothing until we learn whether the rope is discovered or not. I hardly think it probable, however, that they will see it in this darkness. If they do not, all will be well."

"Oh, Mr. Thorne!" cried Sylvia, excitedly, "we must escape—we must!"

"Don't be alarmed, Miss Blair. Everything will turn out well, I think. But, let us go on."

They moved slowly forward, following in the tracks of the two unknown men. In order to have his right hand free, that he might carry a revolver, ready for "business," Howard supported Sylvia with his left arm. He peered anxiously around as they advanced.

"The coast seems clear," he muttered, as they came in sight of the bluff, which could be dimly seen through the darkness. No one is there, unless they are crouching in the darkness at the foot of the precipice."

They paused a few moments, keenly on the outlook for danger; but seeing nothing, they advanced to the base of the precipice, and Thorne uttered an exclamation of satisfaction as he found the rope was still there.

"All right!" he cried, softly. "The rope is here, and our way of escape is open. Those fellows did not find it, whoever they were. Ah! perhaps they did. They may have been Red Robin and Old Bombshell, but if so, I can hardly understand why they were coming in this direction. It could not be that they were going to leave you here among the outlaws without even making an attempt to rescue you."

He hastily made a slip noose at the lower end of the rope, which was not so long that it more than reached the ground, then placed the noose around Sylvia's body, beneath her arms.

"Now, Miss Blair, I will climb the rope, leaving you here until I reach the top, when I will draw you up. Do not be frightened, for the rope cannot possibly break."

With these words he rapidly ascended the knotted rope. At first he drew himself up easily and swiftly, but he soon became tired, and was obliged to stop and rest by winding one leg around the rope. Indeed, he was quite "winded" when he reached the top, and was forced to stop and rest before he attempted to draw Sylvia up.

While he was resting, he several times fancied that he could hear voices not very far away. Yes, at last he was sure he could, and he thought he distinguished the deep, heavy voice of Old Bombshell.

Finally he began drawing up the rope, but after a moment he paused, astonished and alarmed. There was no weight attached to it.

Kneeling, he quickly peered over the verge of the precipice down into the darkness. He could see nothing.

"Sylvia! Sylvia!" he called, softly.

There was no answer, and after a moment, he repeated the call, but with a like result.

"Something must have happened!" he exclaimed. "Where can she be?"

After a slight hesitation, he again swung himself over the precipice, and rapidly descended.

He was about half-down the rope, when he heard voices below. He paused and listened, gazing anxiously downward.

He dimly saw two men, who were coming toward him. They were talking carelessly and distinctly, and he could plainly hear what they said.

"The captain is in camp to-night. I wonder if he has any work for us?"

"Dunno. Blamed if I ain't getting thunderin' tired of this doin' nuthin'!"

That was enough to tell Thorne that they were two of Captain Mystery's outlaws. He fairly trembled for fear that they would find Sylvia.

They passed on by the swinging rope without noticing it, and walked slowly away into the darkness.

Then Thorne quickly descended. He reached the ground and gazed around, but could see nothing of the girl.

"Sylvia! Sylvia!" he again called.

He listened intently, plainly hearing the rollicking shouts and songs of the carousing outlaws, but he received no answer from the one he sought.

Thorne was now thoroughly alarmed. What had happened to Sylvia? Where was she? He asked himself these questions a dozen times, as he stood there, gazing undecidedly around.

"I must find her," he muttered. "She was not taken prisoner, for she would have screamed. Something must have frightened her from this spot. Perhaps she saw those two outlaws approaching, and fled to escape being seen and recaptured."

And this was, indeed, the true reason why Sylvia had disappeared. Almost before Thorne reached the top of the precipice, Sylvia heard voices which she thought were approaching. She listened breathlessly, and in a few moments found that they were approaching. Then she unloosed the noose from beneath her arms, and fled into the darkness.

Thorne was undecided which way to turn, but finally started toward the side of the sink where the outlaws' cabins were clustered. He moved cautiously forward, keenly on the outlook for Sylvia. He was confident that she had not yet been recaptured

by the outlaws, and he hoped to find her ere she again fell into their hands.

Suddenly, upon Thorne's right, at the north side of the camp, he heard a hoarse shout, followed by pistol-shots.

Almost at the same instant, from a short distance away to his left, came a woman's shriek, sharply cutting through the darkness!

CHAPTER XII.

OLD BOMBHELL RELEASES A PRISONER.

WHEN Old Bombshell and Red Robin had slid down the rope into the outlaws' camp, they stood conversing in low tones for a few minutes, laying plans for future actions.

"Waal, by ther holy poker! we're heer, pard!" Bombshell exclaimed. "We dropped right down inter ther hang-out ov Ole Mystery hisself, an' now, pard w'ot's ter be did? Shell we wade inter these bloody outlaws like a cupple o' Lisbon yarthquakes, an' eternally shake ther stuffin' out on 'em? Shell we slide down on 'em like an Alpine avalanche, an' completely bury them beneath ther ruins ov ther own cussedness? By ther Roman gods, pard! ef you say so we'll jist let ourselves loose onter these dod-gasted infarnal varmints an' completely blot 'em out ov existence."

"No, Bombshell, we'll not break loose on these fellows yet. You must remember that there is a young lady in their hands whom we must rescue. If it is discovered that we are in this camp before we succeed in rescuing her, I am afraid that our attempt will be a failure. We must use judgment and caution. One rash act will ruin everything."

"Solid boss-sense, pard. But, ghost o' ther Pan Handle! w'ot er lot ov fun we two outlaw-extaminators might hev ef et warn't fer thet gal! We w'u'dn't leave ernuff ov Ole Mystery's gang o' road-agents in existence ter stop er Down East hen-cart. We w'u'd eternally wipe 'em from ther face ov ther 'arth, an' not ser much as leave er grease-spot ter show they ever existed."

"As it is, we must look after the girl, at once. We will, doubtless, find it a difficult job to rescue her without arousing the camp. We must attempt to get her away quietly, and if we find trouble, one must hold the outlaws at bay, while the other retreats with the girl."

"That's jest ther idee. I'll hole ther bloody varmints back, while you do ther retreatin'! Ef they attempt ter run over ther Border Boomerang, they'll stir up er cirkiss w'ot will knock 'em eendwise. By ther Roman gods! they'll find Ole Bombshell onter his mussil, ef they come whoopin' roun' fer his gore!"

"Very well; that point is settled. Now let's see if we can find the girl. I think I can go direct to the cabin where we saw her in the doorway. Come on."

The two men made their way cautiously forward toward the outlaws' cabins. They passed the stables and cautiously advanced toward the little cabin where they had seen Sylvia.

"Ghost o' ther Pan Handle! I reckon them fellers are havin' a cirkiss," muttered Old Bombshell, as a shout of laughter came from a distant shanty, the door of which was open, allowing a broad belt of light to shine out into the darkness.

They reached the cabin for which they were aiming, but were disappointed by finding the windows closely curtained. Red Robin had hoped to obtain a view of the interior.

The Reckless listened a moment at the door, then suddenly sprang backward, drawing his companion quickly around the corner of the cabin. Barely had he done so, when the door opened and a man came out, and strode away into the darkness.

"By the sword o' battle!" exclaimed Old Bombshell in a hoarse whisper; "I believe that was thet blamed dod-gasted road-agent, Ole Mystery! You keep cool, pard, jist er few blessed minutes, while I look after thet galoot."

With these words, and without waiting for Red Robin to reply, he glided away after the outlaw, who was indeed Captain Mystery.

He followed the outlaw-chief to the little log-jail. When the outlaw had undone the fastenings and entered, he crept forward and listened by the open door, thus overhearing the conversation between Captain Mystery and the accused traitor, Fred Hawkes.

Old Bombshell fairly "itched" to "introduce himself" to Captain Mystery, but his sound judgment told him that such an action would not do at that time. The girl must be rescued before they did anything that was liable to alarm the camp.

Bombshell shrunk back around the corner of the jail as Captain Mystery came out. The outlaw paused only long enough to fasten the door, then turned back toward the cabin where the girls were, passing within a few feet of the Border Boomerang, who was compelled to fairly "hold himself" to keep from springing upon the robber-chief.

"Go et, now; you'll never get a better chance," muttered Old Bombshell. "I'm after you red-hot."

He advanced to the jail-door and examined the fastenings, finding no lock, but three Luge harps, instead—one at the top of the door, one at the side, about half-way down, and another at the bottom. It was evident that the outlaw chief did not fear that his prisoners would be released by anyone in the sink, and surely they could in no way force open the door from within.

Unhasting the door, Old Bombshell entered the building, saying in a low tone:

"Wah are ye, pard? Blessed ef I kin see er consarned thing in this heer Sygian gloom!"

"I am here," came the reply. "Who is it?"

"Who is it? Why, bless yer soul! et can't be thet

ye don't recergrnize me! Jist take ernuther look at my beaucherful phisog! Et must be thet ye know ther Border Boomerang!"

The prisoner uttered an exclamation. "Why, confound it, man! how do you s'pose I kin see ye in this darkness?"

"Hang it all! I fergot erbout thet. Dashed ef I kin see any better than you kin! Cum ter think on et, I don't believe ye know me arter all, fer ye know, I don't chum aroun' wi' outlaws ter any great extent."

"Then you ain't one ov ther gang?" "Waal I sh'u'd remark *not!* Ghost o' ther Pan Handle! w'ot d'yer take me fer?"

"How came you here? Who are you?" "Waal, I kem heer ov my own free will, an' my cognomen are Ole Bombshell. I'm ther great outlaw-exterminator o' ther West. Me an' erauther feller, w'ot same are er ragin' cyclone, jist drapped down this heer hole on business. I clapped my peepers onter Ole Mystery ez he war cumin' heer, an' folloed him. I war jist outside ther door while you two chums were havin' thet pleasant little chat jist now. Real sociable sort ov er time, warn't et?"

"Curse him!" cried the outlaw. "He has doomed me ter die!"

Old Bombshell had felt his way along to the prisoner, and was now crouched beside him.

"Then you don't love Ole Mystery to any great extent? You don't feel er warm spring o' affection bubblin' up in yer buzzum toward yer ole chief?"

"I hate him!" was the fierce reply. "I would like to get my fingers on his lyin' throat! He pretends that he believes me a traitor, but he lies! He never liked me because I would not cow down afore him an' chase his every beck an' nod, like ther most servile slave. An' now he wants me killed off out o' ther way, curse him!"

"Waal, now, frien', don't you think et is sarvin' ye erbout right, fer being mixed up wi' enny sich a piratical gang o' measly outlaws? W'ot in thunder are you heer fer, enny way? C'u'dn't ye get er livin' in enny other way?"

"I hev no excuses ter make fer bein' found in such company," with a hard laugh. "I am known as a respectable miner back in Bowlder Bar, an' hev friends thar who would hardly believe me an outlaw. Thet is ther way with nearly haff o' Captain Mystery's band. They are considered hones' men in ther camp."

"Now looker heer, my man," and there was a stern ring to Old Bombshell's voice; "do you want ter escape bein' shot in ther mornin'?"

"Do I? In course I do! If I c'u'd escape from hyar, I'd bring er gang o' men down on this cussid camp afore mornin' as would wipe Captain Mystery's gang o' outlaws from ther face o' ther 'arth!"

"Now, thet's business!" Bombshell exclaimed, in delight, a new thought evidently striking him. "I sw'ar ef you'll ergree ter git er crowd heer from Bowlder Bar afore mornin', I'll set ye free, get ye out o' heer an' furnish ye with er hoss ter travel with! W'ot d' ye say?"

"Agreed! I'll hev twenty men hyar inside er five hours—ernuff ter wipe out ther gang. Jist cut these cussid ropes!"

Old Bombshell did not hesitate. From what he had overheard, he judged that the accused outlaw would be only too glad of an opportunity for revenge upon his former chief. In a moment Fred Hawkes's bonds were severed.

"Thar ye be, my man, free. You can fight fer yer life now."

"Thanks ter you, an' w'en I fergot it may my right arm wither! Now, let's get out o' hyar, fer I'm anxious ter strike fer Bowlder Bar."

"Right. Cum on."

Old Bombshell led the way, the outlaw following him. Howard Thorne and Sylva Blair saw them as they left the jail, and thought them two of the outlaws.

"Heer's our ladder," said Old Bombshell, as they reached the place where the rope was hanging over the precipice. "Can you climb?"

"Waal, I can try mighty hard on this occasion," responded the outlaw.

"All right. Up I go, an' w'en I reach ther top, I'll shake ther rope. You can climb up then."

With these words Old Bombshell began climbing the rope, mounting upward hand over hand, actually reaching the top with less exertion than it caused Howard Thorne to perform the same feat.

He looked around for Thorne, and was surprised at not seeing him.

"Wonder whar ther chap kin be. He must be round, fer et can't be thet he'd be fool ernuff ter go down thar arter bein' tole ter stay heer."

He shook the rope, and a short time later the outlaw appeared, coming slowly upward, seemingly nearly "winded."

"Give us yer han', pard!" he gasped. "Quick!"

Old Bombshell grasped his hand and drew him safely up over the brink, when the outlaw sunk to the ground, exhausted.

"Thet's w'ot ye can call er climb!" he gasped, as soon as he could speak. "Thort I shouldn't make it one spell."

Soon he arose to his feet and followed Old Bombshell a short distance along the mountain-side.

Suddenly the low warning growl of a dog came to their ears, causing the outlaw to pause in surprise.

"Don't be skeered," said Bombshell. "Ghost o' ther Pan Handle! thet's only my ole dorg, Lion. Left him ter watch ther hosses an' rifles ye know."

At the sound of his master's voice, the faithful animal came bounding joyfully forward to meet him.

They found the horses safely hitched where Bombshell and his friends had left them.

"Now," said Old Bombshell, "you can take one ov these heer critters an' strike out fer Bowlder Bar. To be course you know ther way. You'll hev ther most deefikility in gettin' down this heer mountain. Reckon you'll hev ter lead ther hoss."

"Reckon I kin get down, an' as fer knowin' ther way ter Bowlder Bar bet yer boots I know thet! But I want ther best one ov these hosses—one as is sure-footed an' has got ther wind."

For a moment Old Bombshell hesitated. A suspicion that the outlaw might play him false and steal the horse came over him. But almost immediately he stepped forward and singled out his own horse for the outlaw.

The outlaw reached for the horse's bridle, but he felt an iron grip on his wrist.

"Easy, frien'," admonished Bombshell. "Not too fast. I hev a word ter say ter ye afore ye go. I am goin' ter let you hev this heer piece o' property without anything fer security, an' ef you play me false, by ther Roman gods! I'll see to et as yer hung fer an outlaw!"

Hawkes laughed lightly. "Never fear; I haven't ther slightest intention of playin' you false. I will return afore dawn, without fail. I hev an object—*revenge!*"

"Thet's ernuff; heer's yer hoss. I reckon as how you'll hev er moon afore short'y, an' thet'll help ye sum. Send Tornado right erlong es fast es ther lay o' ther lan' will let ye."

"Don't worry about thet; I'll get out all ther speed thar is in him."

"Turn out er good strong crowd o' men, an' hev 'em cum armed an' prepared fer hot work. I s'pose you can gain admittance to ther outlaws' camp?"

"Jest ez slick's er whistle. We can easily take keer o' ther guards."

"All rite. Now git."

Leaving the outlaw to make his way to Bowlder Bar, Bombshell turned toward the outlaws' camp.

"Thar!" he exclaimed, to himself, "I'll be hung ef I didn't clean fergit Robin Redbreast while I was startin' thet galoot fer er crowd to clean out ther outlaws. Wonder ef he's waitin' fer me now?"

He reached the precipice overlooking the outlaws' camp and looked sharply around for Thorne, but, of course, did not see him. Bombshell was a little alarmed by the young man's absence, for he feared that he had descended into the outlaws' camp and would get into trouble and be captured.

He also feared that he had acted unwisely in not communicating with Red Robin so that the Reckless might know what he was doing.

He was about to swing himself over the precipice, when, from the north side of the camp, startling sounds came to his ears.

First, a wild, hoarse shout, then pistol-shots!

The next instant, from the opposite side of the camp came a shrill female shriek!

Old Bombshell uttered one explosive exclamation, then over the brink of the precipice he went, hastily descending the rope. But when near the ground, he missed his hold and fell. Springing to his feet, he started forward, only to pitch headlong to the ground, a cursing groan escaping from his lips.

One of his ankles was sprained!

CHAPTER XIII.
FIGHTING AGAINST ODDS.

THE moment Howard Thorne heard that shrill female cry for help he knew that it was Sylva's voice, and instantly realized that she was in danger—probably had again fallen into the outlaws' hands.

Instantly he bounded forward in the direction from whence the cry had come.

He quickly came upon two men, in whose rude grasp a female was impotently struggling.

Howard was upon the two ruffians almost before they were aware of it, and seizing one of them by the shoulders, he hurled him to the ground, then sprung toward the other, who released the girl and turned to meet him.

The two men grappled fiercely, just as Sylva, turning to flee, ran straight into the detaining arms of a third outlaw, who appeared on the scene.

The struggle between Howard and the outlaw was short and decisive. Thorne ended it by suddenly giving his adversary a twisting wrench over his hip, sending him to the ground nearly ten feet away.

But then, as the young man sprung toward the third outlaw, who still held fast to Sylva, the one whom he had first hurled to the ground sprung toward him, knife in hand.

Thrusting his hand into one of his side coat-pockets, Thorne jerked out one of his heavy self-cockers and thrusting it forward, fired with the muzzle almost touching the ruffian's breast.

The outlaw uttered a hoarse cry of agony, flung up his arms, reeled backward, and sunk to the ground.

By this time the other outlaw was on his feet, and as Thorne whirled round, the ruffian threw up his arm and pulled trigger.

There was a spout of flame, a sharp report, but Howard was untouched.

Like an echo came the crack of the young man's revolver, and flat upon his face fell the second outlaw.

As number three was having about all he could comfortably attend to in holding the struggling girl, he was not aware of the termination of the struggle.

A heavy blow upon the head with the butt of Thorne's revolver knocked him senseless.

Catching the girl by the hand, Howard cried: "Come, Sylva, run! More of the outlaws are coming!"

Away through the darkness they ran, with half a dozen yelling outlaws hurrying after them.

"Stop!" came the cry. "Halt, or we fire!"

Without heeding, they still fled on, they knew not whither.

Bullets began to whistle around them, but sudden death from a bullet was preferable to falling into the outlaws' hands.

Thorne knew that the ruffians would soon overtake and capture them, if he could not find a place of refuge where he could "stand them off."

Suddenly he came to the side of the sink where the walls rose almost perpendicularly. He could run no further—he was cornered.

But, catching sight of a large boulder, he quickly drew Sylva behind it; then peering over the top, he cried to the outlaws:

"Halt, you infernal villains! Stop, or I fire!"

Unheeding his cry, they still came on.

Taking a quick aim, Thorne fired at the foremost pursuer, and with a cry, the man pitched forward on his face.

This had the effect of bringing the other ruffians to an abrupt halt.

"Oh, waltz right along if you want to!" cried Howard. "Don't pause! I rather think I can wipe out the whole crowd with the show I've got."

For a few moments the outlaws conversed with each other in low tones. Then one of them advanced a step, and speaking distinctly and sternly, he said:

"You had better surrender, my man. You are cornered, and it will avail you nothing to attempt resistance—in fact, such a foolhardy action will only make it worse for you."

"You don't say!" came the scornful, defiant reply. "You actually astonish me! So you think I had better surrender?"

"If you don't cave in at once, when you are taken, we'll string you up to a tree and riddle your body with bullets!"

"Sho! Now that's really terrifying! When you take me—well, when you do, I'll be there to witness the sport."

"Do you surrender?"

"Well, not this eve; some other eve—perhaps."

Again the outlaws conversed in low tones, and while they were talking, stirring sounds again came from the other side of the camp. First came a loud, fierce shout, seemingly from a dozen brazen throats, then a rattling volley of pistol-shots.

For an instant, peering in that direction, Thorne could plainly see the flashes of the weapons which were being discharged.

He knew that either Old Bombshell or Red Robin—perhaps both—had been discovered by the outlaws, and were fighting for their lives.

The outlaws were evidently alarmed by the racket at the other side of the camp, and for a few moments seemed undecided as to what they should do.

Finally the former spokesman again said:

"My man, we will give you one more chance. If you refuse to surrender this time you are doomed! We can easily overpower you and take you prisoner, then, I assure you, your fate will be no mild one. You are foolish if you do not at once come to terms."

Thorne laughed defiantly.

"So you say; I think differently. I shall never surrender as long as there is strength enough in my fingers to pull trigger. If you want me, you will have to take me, and as there are but five of you fellows in fighting condition, and I have seven shots remaining in my revolvers, I fancy I can furnish you with considerable amusement."

The outlaws seemed a little taken back by the young man's defiant words. It became evident that he could not be frightened into surrendering.

In conversing with the outlaws, Thorne's head and shoulders were above the level of the top of the boulder, but he was keenly watchful that none of his foes should lift a weapon.

But the outlaw whom Howard had shot down was not killed, although badly wounded. Of course, Thorne expected no danger from him, but the man was yet dangerous. Slowly he drew a weapon, and taking deliberate aim at the young man's head, fired.

The bullet grazed along Howard's temple, doing no particular damage, yet causing him to stagger backward for a moment. He straightened up to find the yelling outlaws almost upon him.

He had time to fire just one ineffectual shot, then the struggle became hand-to-hand. Almost with gigantic strength, he hurled his assailants back as they sprung upon him. For several moments it seemed as though he would prove a match for the five ruffians; but suddenly one of them, whom he had knocked over, seized his legs and tripped him down. Then his foes sprung upon him and held him helpless.

He was quickly bound and thus made a prisoner.

Meanwhile, where was Red Robin?

After Old Bombshell left him, he crouched beside the cabin a few moments, deeply thinking.

"Who is this Captain Mystery?" he muttered. "No one seems to know. In Bowlder Bar I am branded as being this outlaw chief. It was Faton Stone's voice that first accused me—Cyrus Gaines was the name signed to the notice. By Stone accusing me of being Captain Mystery, I came to think that he might be in some way connected with these outlaws. Will my suspicions prove true?"

For a time he was silent, then he again muttered, half aloud:

"I wonder how we can manage to rescue the girl without alarming the camp? I fancy it will prove a difficult job. There probably is a guard over her. I fancy I have seen her ere I came to this part of the country. Both her face and her voice seem familiar."

He again relapsed into silence. Suddenly he observed a dark form, that was moving cautiously and slowly toward the cabin. He crouched nearer the ground, grasping a revolver.

On came the figure, passing within a short distance.

of Red Robin, and advancing softly to the cabin-door. He did not enter, however, but paused, and peering round the corner, the Reckless saw that the unknown was listening at the door.

"Hullo!" Red Robin mentally exclaimed; "a spy in camp! What does this mean? Is there a traitor in Captain Mystery's band?"

For a short time the man listened at the door, then suddenly darted around the corner of the cabin opposite the Reckless. At the same instant Red Robin heard advancing footsteps.

A man's form loomed up in the gloom, coming toward the cabin. The new-comer did not pause, but, advancing to the door, unhesitatingly entered. It was Captain Mystery.

Barely had the door closed behind the outlaw, when the unknown glided out from around the corner, and again advanced to the door. There he paused and once more seemed listening.

Red Robin watched him keenly, softly muttering: "I wonder who that fellow is? Somehow his form looks natural. Can it be that he is other than one of the outlaws? No, it must be that he is one of Captain Mystery's men. But I wonder where Old Bombshell is. I think that the man who entered the cabin just now was the one he followed away a short time ago."

The reader knows that the eavesdropper was Howard Thorne.

Finally Red Robin saw Thorne cautiously open the door and a minute later the young man drew Sylva Blair out into the darkness and closed the door.

When Thorne opened the cabin-door, the light from within shone out upon him, plainly revealing who he was to Red Robin who uttered a smothered exclamation of surprise.

"Hang me if it's not the young fellow whom we left to watch the rope," muttered the Reckless. "Old Bombshell was afraid he would be a little too fresh to come down here into the outlaws' camp, and so we left him behind. But, just at present, he is decidedly ahead of us both. I imagine that there is better stuff in him than Bombshell thinks."

For a moment, as Howard and Sylva stood conversing, he thought he would join them, but he finally changed his mind, saying softly:

"No, I will leave them alone. They will like it better, and the young man will then have all the honor of rescuing the girl."

Howard and Sylva soon moved away, Red Robin following them a short distance. The red-breasted man soon turned back, however, and went in search for Old Bombshell.

For some time he wandered cautiously around vainly seeking for the eccentric man, who, despite the name by which he was known, was not old by any means. Not finding Bombshell, he returned to the cabin where they had parted, intending to wait for him there. But he finally became tired of waiting, and again started to try and find Bombshell.

Turning the corner of a cabin, he suddenly came face to face with an unknown man.

Head down, Red Robin sought to pass, hoping to do so without being challenged.

But the outlaw caught him by the shoulder, and peered keenly and suspiciously into his face. And then Red Robin's hand fist struck him a heavy blow fairly between the eyes, knocking him down.

The Reckless sprang away into the darkness, as the outlaw staggered to his feet, uttering a hoarse shout and sending two bullets wildly after the red-breasted man, following himself, as fast as his legs would carry him.

His wild shouts soon brought other outlaws to his side, all joining in the pursuit of the Reckless, who was dodging in and out among the cabins, heading toward the place where the rope hung over the cliff. But suddenly Red Robin stumbled and fell. He sprang to his feet to see two forms looming up before him.

There were outlaws between him and the precipice! His escape was cut off!

At his left hand stood the outlaws' jail, the door being open, as Bombshell had left it. As there was no alternative now but to fight for it, he sprang within the dark doorway, and drawing his revolvers, turned on the outlaws, firing two quick shots.

Two men went down, and almost as quickly, at a word of command, sharply spoken, the other outlaws sunk to the ground.

In the moment's silence that ensued, Red Robin heard pistol-shots coming from the other side of the camp.

For a short time the Reckless could hear the outlaws conversing in low tones; then a voice cried:

"Hullo, there!"

"Hullo, yourself!" responded Robin.

"You are in a trap, my man, and had better walk out here and quietly give yourself up. It is the most sensible thing you can do."

At the sound of the voice Red Robin started. He knew that voice well. The speaker was his bitterest enemy—the man who many years before had stolen little Alice Dunbar from her home—Faton Stone!

"Aha!" cried the Reckless, "I know you, Faton Stone! and as sure as I set eyes upon you, a bullet from my revolver shall find your heart!"

A fierce cry of delight came from Faton Stone's lips.

"Morton Dunbar, by the gods!" he shouted. "Ah! I have you now! You escaped me last night, but as sure as there is a living God, you die to-night!"

Red Robin uttered a hard, reckless laugh of defiance, but made no verbal reply.

Suddenly, with one wild, unanimous yell, the outlaws sprang to their feet and came rushing toward the jail, shouting and firing as they came.

Calmly standing in the doorway, the Reckless worked his revolvers so that it seemed that one continued blaze of flame issued from their muzzles, and

ere the outlaws who were not stricken down by the death-dealing bullets could reach the door, he had emptied every chamber.

He hurled the now useless weapons at his foes, one of them striking a man fairly in the face and knocking him down. Then he drew a knife and fought them hand-to-hand, hurling many an outlaw back with bleeding wounds. But finally he was forced back into the building, the outlaws following, striving to overpower and take him prisoner.

Then ensued a terrible struggle in the darkness!

CHAPTER XIV.

A WRONGED GIRL'S VENGEANCE.

THE most horrible sounds issued from the log jail where the fierce struggle was taking place—shouts, oaths, groans, shrieks and an occasional pistol-shot.

But suddenly a flood of light was turned upon the struggling mass of men, plainly revealing Red Robin to his foes, who had hitherto been baffled by the darkness.

Almost instantly the Reckless received a heavy blow upon the head, being knocked senseless. A wild, fierce shout came from the outlaws, and the life would have been at once "stamped out" of the fallen man's body had not a stern voice restrained them.

"Bind him, hand and foot," commanded Captain Mystery. "He is my prisoner."

His orders were at once obeyed.

The outlaws found that they had paid dearly for their victory. Three men were dead, and many wounded slightly.

"Curse him!" fiercely grated the outlaw chief. "He shall die ere another day! But there is a girl missing—the captive—does any one know aught of her?"

"She is safe, captain," answered a man in the doorway, who held the lighted lantern which illuminated the interior of the jail. "She was evidently attempting to escape, when some of the boys ran across her. She screamed when they seized her, and a young fellow came to her aid, and laid out some of the men; but, both he and the girl were finally captured. I was with the crowd that took him prisoner, but, hearing the racket over here, I left as soon as he was taken and hurried hither, securing this lantern as I came."

"And arrived just in the nick of time; your light materially assisted us in securing this fellow. But what have they done with the girl?"

"I do not know, for I did not remain to see. They will probably bring the young fellow here."

"Curse it!" exclaimed the outlaw chief. "I fail to understand how these two fellows gained admittance to this camp. They could not have passed the guards undetected. There may be more in the sink. But, worse than everything else, the traitor, Fred Hawkes, has escaped! Out, men, and scour the entire bottom!"

Several of the outlaws instantly departed to execute this command.

As Captain Mystery turned to leave the jail, three of his followers came in, bearing the unlucky Howard Thorne.

"Ah!" exclaimed the outlaw chief; "so this is the other chap, is it? These two fellows have had considerable sport at our expense, but I swear they shall pay dearly for it!"

He left the jail and quickly made his way back to Inez's cabin, where, as he expected, he found Sylva, who was weeping hysterically. Inez was vainly trying to comfort the nearly distracted girl.

"Oh!" cried Captain Mystery, triumphantly. "So our pretty bird is back again? Her attempt to fly away was a most lamentable failure. It was cruel of her—we should have missed her so much!"

Sylva shrank away from him, holding up her hands in horror and wildly crying:

"Oh, Inez, Inez, don't let him approach me! The monster! Don't let him!"

Inez turned an appealing glance upon Captain Mystery, who did not heed it, however, but laughed as though really amused.

"Why, this is really tragical!" he exclaimed, lightly. "Miss Sylva should fit for the stage. But, jesting aside, I am really pleased to once more behold her sweet face."

"Which you should never see again could I prevent it, you inhuman monster!" spiritedly retorted Sylva, for a moment looking defiantly at him through her tears. "I should have escaped—"

"Thanks to the fellow who came to your aid, as I have learned. I have him in my hands now, and the fact that he has learned the secret of our retreat will make it bad for him. The men will demand that he be put out of the way, so that we may still remain here in safety. Should he be allowed to escape, he would bring the Vigilantes of Boulder Bar down upon us. His race is nearly run."

"He is a man, and—"

"In love with you," finished the outlaw.

Sylva turned from him in high disdain; but quickly approaching her side, he spoke rapidly, his voice soft and low:

"Do not be alarmed, my dear Miss Sylva. Perhaps my words were ill chosen, but I did not mean to be rough. I have reasons for not wishing to anger you against me—the best of reasons. I love you! I have loved you long, although I seldom saw you. You were growing up the very image of your mother—how could I help loving you?"

Fairly aroused, she turned on him now, with flashing eyes.

"Don't speak to me of love!" she cried, scornfully. "You love!—such a vile wretch! Your hatred is preferable to your love!"

"Girl," exclaimed Captain Mystery, "I do love you, and I solemnly swear that before another day dawns you shall be my wife! You little dream whom you are talking to!"

"I am talking to a vile outlaw, who hides his face beneath a mask! An inhuman monster, whose hands are stained with human blood! Why, you even hide your face from two helpless girls, one of whom you are basely deceiving. You dare not show your face—"

The outlaw interrupted her with a hard laugh. "Indeed I dare. If you wish to see my face—look!"

With one swift motion, he removed his mask, and Sylva Blair uttered a wild shriek, as she reeled backward, crying:

"My father!"

Inez caught her as she seemed about to fall, and assisted her to the little bed, where Sylva sunk down, nearly fainting.

"Listen, Sylva," and the outlaw stood quietly before her. "I am the one whom, since you can remember, you have known as father. I have played the part of a parent, after a manner, although it has been a hard part for me to act. I have supported and educated you, but we have not been much together. I am he whom you have known as Henry Blair—"

"'Tis false! I will not believe it!"

"I swear it is true! I am Henry Blair, yet, of a truth, I am not your father!"

"I knew it! I knew it! It could not be!—and yet you say—you are Henry Blair—"

"Thus known by you, although that is not my true name. I loved your mother long, long years ago, but another won her. How you fell into my hands matters little. But I have learned to love you as dearly as I did your mother, and to-night I swear you shall be my wife."

Again Sylva seemed overcome. This astounding revelation gave her such a shock that she once more sunk back on the bed.

"Your name," continued the outlaw, "is not Sylva Blair, but Alice Dunbar. However, you will change it before morning."

During this interview, Inez had been a silent yet interested listener. At first she considered the outlaw's talk and love-making as but a part of his scheme to cause Henry Blair to at once pay over the money demanded; but, as she listened, she began to suspect that all was not right. Her suspicions grew rapidly, and finally she became convinced that Captain Mystery was playing her false. She now sprang to her feet, her eyes literally ablaze with anger, her voice low and husky as she spoke:

"What do I hear? What does this mean? You have deceived me, captain!"

"Now be sensible, Inez!" angrily protested the outlaw. "Before I ever saw your face, I had resolved to one day make this girl my wife."

"And you boldly tell me this!" she hissed, her whole form trembling with suppressed emotion. "You, who times without number, have sworn to marry me! Aha! it is all plain to me now; but you shall never live to do so!"

With these words, she drew a small dagger from her bosom, and sprang toward him, but the brigand chief caught her wrist, and with a snarling curse, gave it a wrench that caused her to utter a cry of pain and drop the dagger; then seizing her in his arms, he bore her from the room, closing the door behind him. In the small back-room he stood her upon her feet, saying sharply:

"Now be sensible, my girl, or it will be worse for you! Don't try on any more of your tricks, for if you do, you will be sorry for it!"

Her answer was a second spring toward him, passion-mad, wildly grasping at his throat.

With one blow, the heartless wretch knocked her senseless at his feet.

"There," he cried, savagely, "that settles you for a time, at least. Curse you for a she-cat! If you are desperate enough to attempt to take my life, you would undoubtedly murder the girl if left alone with her. I think it will be a good plan to truss you up."

Securing a lariat, he rapidly bound her hands and feet, then departed leaving her lying unconscious on the floor.

Passing through the front room, he scarcely glanced at Sylva, who was lying on the bed, white and breathless, nearly unconscious. Fastening the cabin-door, he went out among his men, inquiring if they had found any one else other than the band in the sink, and soon learned that they had not. Wherever Old Bombshell was, he had escaped discovery.

Captain Mystery muttered a savage oath when he heard their reply.

"Hawkes, the traitor, must be somewhere in the sink. Dan Carter, take four men and search for him until he is found."

And Captain Mystery strode away into the darkness.

At the mouth of the tunnel he found a lantern, which he lighted. After he had proceeded a short distance along the tunnel, he turned into a narrow side-passage. He soon paused before a door that seemed set in the very face of the wall. With a heavy key he unlocked this door, and throwing it open, a small rock chamber was revealed in which were boxes, casks, a rough table and a couch of skins and furs.

Captain Mystery entered, setting the lantern upon the table. Removing the cover from one of the boxes, he took out a flask of liquor and a glass. Filling the glass, he raised it aloft, crying:

"Here's death to Morton Dunbar!"

He drank the liquor, and also several more glasses in rapid succession. Finally he sunk back on the

couch in a deep reverie. Without intending to do so, he at last fell asleep.

When Captain Mystery again emerged from the tunnel, he found that his last brief orders had been carried out. A portion of the camp was illumined by the light of two large bonfires that were built a few rods apart in front of the outlaws' cabins. He could see men passing back and forth in the firelight, and between the two fires he could distinguish two forms which he well knew were his prisoners, who were securely bound to stout stakes driven upright in the ground.

"Ha! ha!" he laughed. "The boys have carried out my orders. To-night witnesses the consummation of my schemes, for Alice Dunbar becomes my wife and Morton Dunbar dies! The game is mine!"

He made his way to the cabin where the girls were confined, and undoing the fastenings, entered. Sylva was in the room, but she sprang up and endeavored to rush by him and escape, as he entered. He caught her in his arms, laughing softly.

"Not so fast, little one," he said. "I wish you to go with me."

"Release me, sir!" she cried.

"Now be quiet, my dear, and come with me. You may wish to see the young fellow who attempted to assist you to escape. I will take you to him."

She did not resist as he led her toward the bonfires. Wild schemes for escape were running through her head, however.

Between the fires were Red Robin and Howard Thorne, both securely bound to two upright posts. Red Robin was bound with his back to the post, his hands being secured behind him. Thorne, however, was facing the post, to which he was bound. The young man was stripped to the waist, leaving his bare back exposed.

Captain Mystery laughed triumphantly as his eyes rested upon the scene. He led the girl before Red Robin.

"Morton Dunbar," he said, "I have brought you your daughter. Behold her! You know me; I am Faton Stone, your deadly foe!"

For a moment the red-breasted man gazed searchingly at Sylva, then a low cry of recognition broke from his lips. He had seen her in the stage, when he so gallantly rescued them from the road-agents, but had barely glanced at her, and, although her face seemed familiar, he had not suspected the truth. But now, upon closer scrutiny, he saw in her face a strong resemblance to the woman who, years before, had been his wife.

"This is your father, little one," continued the outlaw-chief to Sylva. "The words I speak are true—I swear it by the heavens above!"

Sylva was amazed, bewildered by the startling revelation. This strange man her father? She could scarcely believe it, yet she was now convinced that the man whom she had known as father was no kin of hers.

A sharp whistle from Captain Mystery brought the outlaws around. Then commanding silence, the chief spoke briefly and to the point.

"My men, you all know these two prisoners. They have stolen into our camp and sought to carry away a valued captive—they have learned the secret of our retreat—they have murdered several of our friends—"

"Five on 'em, boss," respectfully interrupted one of the men.

"Now," cried Captain Mystery, "what shall their doom be?"

"Death!" shouted the outlaws in chorus.

The chief turned to the prisoners, saying grimly:

"You hear your sentence. You are doomed; but, Morton Dunbar, ere you die, you must witness the consummation of my vengeance. To-night I marry your beautiful daughter, whose mother you won from me years ago."

"Never, you wretch!" shrieked Sylva, or, properly, Alice Dunbar, tearing herself from his grasp. "Hands off, you monster!"

Red Robin seemed an impassive observer, but in his dark eyes there burned a fierce fire, and within his bosom raged a perfect vortex of passion.

At a word of command, two men advanced from among the other outlaws. One, a dark-clothed, ministerial-appearing man, carried a small book in his hand; the other carried a heavy raw-hide whip. The man with the whip advanced to the side of Howard Thorne; the other paused in front of Captain Mystery.

"Young woman," said the chief, quietly, "I think you have formed more than a passing fancy for this young fellow, here. Now hear me: Unless you consent to become my wife, he shall be lashed to death!"

The girl reeled blindly as though about to fall, but quickly recovered herself, as the outlaw continued in cold, heartless tones:

"And then, if you are still stubborn—if that does not bring you to your senses—I solemnly swear that your own father, here, shall be roasted alive!"

She sunk upon her knees before him, tears streaming from her eyes, and sobs shaking her slender frame, as she held out her hands to him, pleading brokenly for mercy.

He turned coldly to the man with the whip.

"Get ready!" he commanded. "When I count three, lay on the lash and do not spare your muscle. My lady, are you still obstinate?"

But she only pleaded for mercy.

"Stop, Sylva!" cried Thorne. "Do not plead with that detestable brute and villain! Let them go on with their sport."

"One!" counted the outlaw.

Breathless silence fell upon the strange gathering.

"Two!"

But, ere he could utter the final three, there came a woman's voice, crying:

"Die, you infamous deceiver, die!"

A pistol-shot rung out, and, with a cry of pain, Captain Mystery fell forward upon his face!

Wild Inez had succeeded in freeing herself from her bonds, and had wreaked vengeance upon the heartless wretch, at last.

Following the shot, a wild yell rung out, and out of the darkness, toward the outlaws bounded a score of forms, yelling and firing as they came!

The men from Bowlder Bar had arrived!

CHAPTER XV.

CLOSING SCENES.

TAKEN completely by surprise, one-half of the outlaws were shot down before they could draw a weapon. Those who were untouched, although bewildered and astounded, drew their weapons and began fighting for their lives.

Fiercely raged the struggle there, in the circle of light made by the two bonfires. The outlaws were desperate men, fighting with ropes around their necks, as it were, and they fought like tigers.

Suddenly a familiar voice was heard crying:

"Sock et ter the bloody varlets! Don't leave er p'izen outlaw kickin'! Ghost o' ther Pan Handle! this are jist ther sort ov er quiet leetle scrimmage as I do enjoy! Wade inter ther imps o' Satan an' make 'em think they've run ag'in' er Lisbon yarthquake! Whoop! Hurray!"

And Old Bombshell came limping painfully into the circle of firelight, revolver in hand, occasionally firing a shot.

Not one of the outlaws escaped. All were slain or made prisoners. But the men from Bowlder Bar also suffered, for many of them were sorely wounded, while, among those killed outright, were Big Burg and the outlaw who had led the party to Captain Mystery's retreat, Fred Hawkes.

As soon as he could hobble along to where they were, Old Bombshell cut Howard Thorne and Red Robin's bonds, saying to the latter:

"Thar ye be, pard, free by ther Roman gods! I was layin' under kiver durin' ther hull durned cir-kiss, waitin' fer them fellers ter cum, but ef they hadn't got erloog jist ez they did, blamed ef I sh'udn't pitched inter these p'izen outlaws myself, lame ankle an' all. Ghost o' the Pan Handle, yes!"

Scarcely heeding Bombshell's words, Red Robin strode hastily forward to where Howard Thorne was bending over the unconscious form of Alice Dunbar.

"Water!" gasped the young man. "Quick!"

"Won't fire-water do, my lad?" asked Old Bombshell, hastily producing a flask of liquor.

"Yes, yes! Give it here!" and Thorne hastily snatched it from Bombshell's hands.

He quickly bathed her temples with the liquor and poured a few drops between the girl's white lips. As a result, a slight shudder ran over her frame, and with a low moan, she opened her eyes.

"Now," said Thorne, briskly, "she must be carried away from here. Such a scene is hardly suitable for her eyes."

He lifted her in his arms and bore her away to the little cabin where she had spent the most of her time since being brought to the outlaws' camp. Silently Red Robin followed in the young man's footsteps.

Entering the cabin, Howard placed the girl upon the bed, saying:

"You are safe now. Everything is all right. Be quiet until you regain your strength, Sylva."

At the sound of that name, with sudden energy, she sat up.

"That is not my name—I am not Sylva Blair any more!" she sobbed, in a bewildered manner. "I am some one else! Oh! I don't know who I am!"

Red Robin came forward.

"You are my daughter—my dear, darling daughter, for long years lost to me, but found, at last! I have searched the wide world over for you, and my patient, persistent search has been rewarded by finding you, thank God!"

But she shook her head.

"I do not understand. He said I was your daughter, yet I am bewildered. It seems so strange—so very strange! More like a dream than reality. It was a great shock to me when I found that the man whom I had always known as father was an outlaw. But now, to learn that he is not my father, but that you are instead—it is very strange!"

Red Robin sat down in a chair beside the bed, taking one of her passive hands in his, while Thorne silently stood near by.

"Listen, Alice, for that is your true name," he said; "and I will tell you the story of the past as briefly and plainly as possible."

Then he told her the story, which was substantially as Faton Stone had related. But he added more, telling her of the long, weary years of wandering over the face of the earth, vainly seeking his daughter and his bitter foe.

She listened quietly until he was done, then she stretched out her arms to him, saying:

"Father, I am so glad you have found me!"

He clasped her in his arms and kissed her.

"For the first time since you were a wee child, little one," he said, laughing. "Ah! I am so happy, now that I have found you!"

"And I am happy, too, dear father—" Then, noticing Howard: "But, here is Mr. Thorne, whom I fear we are forgetting, and whom I have to thank for his gallant attempt to rescue me."

At this moment the door opened, and a man appeared, saying hastily:

"Red Robin is wanted. They told me I should find him here. The outlaw chief is dying and wants to see you, sir."

Red Robin arose, his face growing hard, and stern. Turning to Howard, he said:

"I leave her in your care for a time. I will soon return."

He left the cabin, and made his way to the place where he had seen the outlaw chief fall when stricken down by the bullet from Wild Inez's pistol. He found his foe lying helpless on the ground, his mask still on. The men from Bowlder Bar were gathered around, while Old Bombshell was crouching beside the outlaw.

Bombshell saw Red Robin as he came up, but uttered not a word.

"Ah, Morton Dunbar," cried Captain Mystery, otherwise Faton Stone; "the game is yours! I have played my last card, and failed just when I was confident of winning. Failed, failed! wretchedly failed!"

The red-breasted man did not speak, but stood looking accusingly down upon his foe.

"I am dying!" continued Stone. "Dying here before you, a crime-stained wretch! I do not ask your forgiveness for the wrong I have done you—I do not deserve it. I do not even ask your pity. But I felt that, before I died, I must see you and confess that I had bitterly, bitterly wronged you."

"Is this all?" asked Dunbar, his tones low and suppressed.

"Yes; all except that I wish to acknowledge that I falsely branded you as being an outlaw, for it was I who accused you of being Captain Mystery. Will some one remove my mask?"

Old Bombshell quickly unloosed the mask, and when it was stripped away from the outlaw's face, the men of Bowlder Bar uttered a cry of amazement.

They saw the face of him known to them as *Cyrus Gaines*!

A faint, grim smile flitted over the dying man's pale face.

"I have deceived you all," he declared. "I have successfully played five parts in this little drama with a tragic ending—namely, Faton Stone, Henry Blair, Cyrus Gaines, Captain Mystery and *Faro Kate, the Masked Queen*!"

Another cry of amazement came from the listeners.

"You can see how the little trick could be played. I am small and slim, and my voice I can easily make resemble that of a woman. Of course *Faro Kate* and *Cyrus Gaines* were never seen in company. The trick was an easy one, and a mysterious masked woman drew custom to my faro-table. Only a few of my chosen men knew that Captain Mystery and *Faro Kate* were one and the same. These few kept me well informed as to the manner in which things were moving here at the camp, and through them I sometimes communicated my orders to the men. This is all I have to reveal."

"And now, Faton Stone," said Old Bombshell, rising to his feet, "do you know me?"

"Yes," was the reply, "I knew all the time that you were a detective sent to hunt me down. For that reason, I hired some roughs to kill you, but they failed in the attempt."

"Faton Stone, you have not yet penetrated my disguise. I am a detective, yet I am more than you think. I was once your friend and companion. I am he whom you foully attempted to murder, yet failed in the attempt, although you thought you succeeded: I am *Barret Dorne*—look!"

He tore away the mass of false hair and beard, and a cry of amazement broke from the lips of both Faton Stone and Morton Dunbar as they saw the face revealed—that of Barret Dorne! The red-breasted man was indeed astonished! He knew that Faton Stone had failed in his attempt to murder Barret Dorne, but that the strange, eccentric Old Bombshell was Dorne he never dreamed.

The night, truly, was one of startling events and astounding revelations.

Ere another day dawned, Faton Stone ceased to live, dying from the effects of the bullet fired by Wild Inez. He was buried in the mountain sink, as were also the rest of his lawless followers, the most of whom were slain by bullet or steel, but some of whom had been summarily lynched by the men of Bowlder Bar.

The outlaws' cabins were burned to the ground, the men from the Bar leaving them blazing as they departed from the sink.

Morton Dunbar and his daughter, accompanied by Barret Dorne and Howard Thorne, made their way back to Bowlder Bar.

During the journey, the red-breasted man explained to Dorne and Howard a point that had puzzled them not a little—why the bullets fired fairly at his breast failed to do him damage. Beneath his clothes he wore a shirt with a silk pad under it, and these had been a complete foil to all pistol-bullets. The red vest was worn to draw the shots of a foe to his breast, for any one would naturally aim at a mark so prominent.

At Bowlder Bar, Barret Dorne, Morton Dunbar and the beautiful Alice became the honored guests of Percy Thorne, Howard's father. And so the young man, now thoroughly in love with Alice, had an opportunity to press his suit, and it cost Morton Dunbar a pang of regret to say "Yes," for it seemed almost like losing his daughter, so newly found. But, when he entered into partnership with Percy Thorne, in the mining business, it did not seem so bad, for he could then have Alice near him, where he could see her every day.

As soon as his sprained ankle would permit, Barret Dorne left Bowlder Bar for fresh fields. His faithful dog, Lion, accompanied him, of course.

Wild Inez was never seen after that eventful night in the outlaws' camp.

THE END.

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BY EDWARD L. WHEELER.

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